With Qaidu, who lived around AD 1050–1100, we finally emerge from the Stygian gloom of legend into the clear (well, fairly clear) light of history. The Mongols are first mentioned in texts of the Tang dynasty of China in the ninth century and during the succeeding Liao dynasty were reliable allies of the Chinese emperor. According to some accounts, they were originally forest peoples from the taiga who had migrated south. The Chinese traced their origins to the Mengwu tribe, part of the Shiwei confederation in the years of Tang dominance. By this time they had firmly established themselves in the Onon-Kerulen area of Mongolia.[3] Two things changed with the khanate (rulership) of Qaidu. First Qaidu began to intrigue with the Jurchen people of Manchuria, who would finally overthrow the Liao dynasty in the early twelfth century and establish the Jin dynasty. Then he decisively switched the Mongol economy from limited pastoralism and agriculture to full-blooded pastoralism, introducing new animals like sheep and camels; some historians claim that this was a backward step and that the Mongols had regressed from the Uighurs, who ran farms and homesteads.[4] Yet, despite his great abilities, Qaidu bequeathed to the Mongols a poisoned chalice in the shape of bitter feuding between the two principal clans in the Mongol tribe, the Borjigid and the Tayichiud (there were thirteen clans altogether but none as important as these). His eldest son Bai Shingqor Doqsin was made head of the Borjigid as the privilege of the senior sibling, but the younger (Charaqai Lingqu), formed his own lineage, the Tayichiud clan, as part of some obscure fraternal conflict. The desperate conflict between these two clans alone made it impossible for Qaidu or any of his successors to emerge as the khan of a united supertribe.[5]

The history of the turbulent twelfth century in Mongolia was dominated by relations with the new Jin empire in China. The atmosphere of chaos that emerges from the sources is partly explained by the fact that constant warfare between the Chinese and the nomads on the steppes went on at the same time as intra-steppe warfare between the five principal peoples of Mongolia – the Mongols, Merkit, Tartars, Kereit and Naiman – who were all at each other's throats, as well as the continuing feud within the Mongol tribe between the Borjigid and Tayichiud clans. Yet another factor is that the Mongol tribe did not simply consist of all the clans and sub-tribes whose native tongue was Mongolian, but that other tribes – Tartars, Naiman and Kereit – also contained sub-tribes who were Mongols in an ethnological and linguistic sense. The only easy way to differentiate the Mongols from the other tribes is to say that they were the only purely pagan tribe – the others practising a mixture of Nestorian Christianity and shamanism.

Medieval Chinese historians made a rough-and-ready distinction between the various 'barbarians' on their frontier, dividing them into the 'civilised' or 'White' Tartars south of the Gobi and along the Great Wall, principally the Ongud; the Kereit or 'Black Tartars' who lived a non-luxurious and precarious existence on the steppes, sustaining themselves with pride at their superiority over the cowardly 'White Tartars' who had sold their birthright for a mess of Chinese pottage; and what they called the 'Wild Tartars' of southern Siberia who eked out a living from hunting and fishing.[6] The Mongols, insofar as they were identified separately, were placed by Chinese historians as being somewhere between the White and Black Tartars; only with the rise of Qaidu did the Chinese realise they were something more formidable.

The reality of the power structure in Mongolia was more complex. The most powerful nation was the Naiman, a people of Turkic origins who lived on the southern slopes of the Altai Mountains and the upper Irtysh River and were gradually spreading over the Tarbaghatai and the upper reaches of the Selenga and Orkhon Rivers. They considered themselves the heirs to the Uighur empire which had collapsed in the mid-ninth century. Politically cohesive until the early thirteenth century, they embraced a form of Nestorian Christianity mitigated by indigenous shamanism and were culturally more advanced than the tribes of northern and central Mongolia.[7] Next in importance were the Kereit, to the east of the Naiman with whom they were allied, also Nestorian Christians, who clustered around the upper reaches of the River Selenga and the Orkhon and Tula valleys.[8] The Tartars, comprising six different clans, who occupied the steppe region to the south of the Kerulen River, were the Chinese secret weapon in the twelfth century and have sometimes been called the gendarmerie of the Jin dynasty. All Chinese rulers sought to palliate the threat from their dangerous northern nomadic neighbours by a systematic policy of divide and rule, and the Tartars, until the end of the twelfth century, played the role admirably. As early as the tenth century Chinese historians identifided the Tsu-pu (almost certainly the Tartars) as the dominant tribe in eastern Mongolia. They were the traditional enemies of the Kereit and were said to have annihilated a Kereit army 40,000 strong in the early twelfth century.[9] The Tartars were particularly dangerous to the Mongols as they lived just to the south of their territories, the Mongol homeland being around the Onon and Kerulen Rivers. To the northwest of the Mongols, on the lower River Selenga south of Lake Baikal and around Lake Khovsgol, was another warlike tribe, the Merkit, fortunately for the Mongols divided into three branches each with its own ruler; the Merkit were as fragmented as the Naiman were cohesive.[10]

The first half of the twelfth century brought a significant episode in the history of the Mongols with the khanate of Qabul, Qaidu's grandson, sometimes derided for his Pantagruel-like appetite but clearly a man of great ability. In 1125 he went to China to attend the coronation of the emperor Xi Zong and was said to have shocked his hosts by his gluttony. It was probably on a subsequent visit that he committed the ultimate social gaffe, getting horribly drunk at a banquet, tweaking the emperor's beard and generally scandalising his courtiers.[11] Yet the Jin did not make the mistake of treating him as a buffoon, for his able command of steppe politics had already made him a dangerous force on the frontier. So worried were the Jin by Qabul that, having allowed him to depart in disgrace from court, they had second thoughts and sent an armed party in pursuit to bring him back and force him to sign articles of vassalage. Alerted to the pursuit, Qabul lured the Jin posse into an ambush and slaughtered them to the last man. At this the gloves came off, and from 1135 to 1147 there was bitter warfare between the Jin and the Mongols. The Jin once again tried to use the Tartars as their secret weapon but Qabul defeated them on several occasions as well as doling out a serious check to a large Jin expedition that crossed the northern frontier into Mongolia in 1137.[12] He managed to form a temporary coalition of the principal Mongol tribes, but was very far from being a supreme ruler or khan of khans; he was a temporary military leader, not a permanent ruler, the coalition was shortlived and in no sense exhibited the permanent features of supertribalism.[13]

Despite having shown so much skill in steppe politics, Qabul left behind a shirt of Nessus by choosing a Tayichiud noble as his successor, passing over all his seven sons. In Tayichiud eyes this now made them, not the Borjigid, the senior Mongol clan. Recriminations and jealousies between the two septs were now raised to a new height. Some scholars think that this event, rather than Qaidu's misguided dividing of the realm between his sons generations earlier, was the truly significant event that weakened the Mongols and might have finished them off for all time as a serious political force.[14]

The Tayichiud chosen was Ambaghai. In 1143 he felt confident enough to take the war to the Jin and captured twenty of their forts near the Great Wall. Jin credibility was now at risk, and a large expedition was sent north in 1146. When this too failed – the Chinese could never defeat the Mongols in a pitched battle – the Jin were forced to accept a humiliating peace, in which the nomads for the first time gave terms to a Chinese emperor. The peace terms required the Jin to accept heavy reparations of sheep, cattle and grain, to abandon some of the frontier forts the Mongols perceived to be threatening and to pay a subsidy.[15] But the Jin had their revenge, and once again it was the Tartars who did the dirty work. To achieve this they were prepared to break the sacred customs of steppe hospitality. Ambaghai, thinking himself the equal as a politician of Qabul, went to the Tartar camp in the early 1150s to deliver his daughter as a bride, to seal what he thought would be a clever alliance with the Tartars. The Tartars played along but wanted none of Ambaghai's schemes. They handed him over to the Jin, who crucified him on a wooden donkey. At the moment of death he called on all Mongols to avenge him.[16] This was an atrocity that was never forgotten, and its memory would surface seventy years later with devastating consequences for the Jin.

Given the proviso that all dates in the early history of the Mongols are conjectural, we may tentatively place Ambaghai's death in 1156. He was succeeded by Qutula, a Borjigid, thus restoring that clan as the tribe's 'natural' rulers. Yet there is much that is obscure about Qutula's election. Some say that the Tayichiud broke away definitively from the Mongol confederation at this point and separated themselves physically from the Borjigid by finding themselves a new headquarters north and east of Lake Baikal.[17] Others claim that Qutula in desperation offered a fresh election in which he would stand but only the Tayichiud would vote. Yet another bizarre factor is that Qutula was Qabul's son yet had been expressly excluded from the succession when Qabul nominated Ambaghai.

Whatever the facts of his accession, the upshot was a further ratcheting of the tensions between Borjigid and Tayichiud. In Mongol lore there was a supposed difference between Nirun, 'the sons of light', and lesser tribesmen known as Durlukin – perhaps something like the distinction between the Guardians and the military class in Plato's *Republic*.[18] The problem was that both Borjigid and Tayichiud regarded themselves as Nirun and the rival clan as lesser beings. This caste difference was later strongly emphasised in the 'bible' of the Mongol empire – the *Secret History* – where only members of the Borjigid lineage are regarded as proper Mongols, with the Tayichiud as 'cousins' or poor relations, equivalent to other such minor appendages as the Besud, Oronar and Arulad clans.[19] All of this is properly Mongol esoterica, but the practical consequence of the feuding was that the Mongols were fatally weakened in the 1150s and no longer the force they were in Qabul's day. The Jin took full advantage of this, dug into their treasury to pay their gendarmes, and launched the Tartars again in a series of ferocious raids. Qutula fought thirteen pitched battles against them in this decade but could never achieve outright victory, probably through lack of numbers after the Tayichiud desertion.

He seems to have been an unlucky khan, for all the sources speak of his towering personal qualities. Said to have inherited his father's gargantuan appetite and to be immune to pain, he had powerful hands like a bear's paws and had a voice of a Boanerges worthy of history's other great bell-like declaimers, Danton and Pitt the Elder. According to one description, 'His voice resounded like thunder in the mountains . . . he could snap a man in two as you might snap an arrow. On winter nights he slept watched over by a fire built of great trees, and felt neither the sparks nor the brands that fell upon his body; at his awakening he took the burns for the stings of insects.'[20] Qutula could eat an entire sheep and drain a huge bowl of koumiss at a single sitting. Once, on the run from the Tartars, he hid among reeds, using one of them as a breathing tube while he lay submerged in water. The Tartars saw only his horse which appeared to be sinking in quicksands and concluded that the marsh had already claimed their quarry. Once they had gone, he pulled his horse out of the bog by its mane.[21] Yet for all his great qualities he lacked the numbers to deal decisively with the Tartars. After he had fought the thirteen indecisive battles, the Jin finally concluded he was sufficiently weakened to be easy

pickings. They prepared a great joint expedition with the Tartars which achieved total victory over the Mongols at Lake Buir in 1161. It is unclear whether Qutula died in this battle but shortly afterwards he was no more, and the Borjigid clan was close to extinction.[22]

The next Borjigid to take up the reins was Yesugei. There is something of a mystery about Yesugei and his origins. The official version, in the *Secret History*, is that he was the third son of Bartan, Qabul's second son, and thus clearly a member of the ruling elite.[23] Yet Yesugei never ruled a Mongol confederation as Qabul, Ambaghai and Qutula had done. He had a camp on the River Onon near modern Gurvan Nuur, where he commanded a ragtag host of Borjigid, renegade Tayichiud and other clans, but he was never powerful enough to be elected khan.[24] His men were essentially guerrillas, a band formed of freelance operators and lawless 'wandering stars' who chafed against the duties and restrictions imposed by kinship and broke away from their original clans to be free spirits on the steppes. Since life as an individual in Mongolia was highly precarious, such men tended to gravitate around a charismatic leader, under pressure constantly to deliver booty.[25] As Yesugei was essentially a captain of *condottieri*, the suspicion has arisen that his inclusion in the genealogy of the Mongol ruling elite, as set out in the *Secret History*, is later propaganda, designed to enhance the glory and status of Genghis Khan. The probability is that Yesugei was the chieftain of a sub-clan, with no connection whatever with Bartan and Qabul and that he was in Mongol terms a mere *baghatur* or man of honour – the title habitually given to prominent nomads who were not of the royal line.[26]

In the 1150s Yesugei was in alliance with Qutula but he had his own goals and ambitions and for this reason often disobeyed his overlord. Yesugei's key idea was that to rise higher in the Mongol hierarchy he should ally himself with the Kereit leader Toghril (the name means 'gyrfalcon'), who needed allies since his position was under constant threat from his kinsmen. Toghril had had a difficult life. At the age of 7 he had been captured by the Merkit, enslaved, and made to grind millet with a mortar and pestle. He was rescued in a raid by his father but six years later was again enslaved, this time along with his mother, by the Tartars. This time his role in serfdom was to tend camels. Somehow he escaped, but the two incidents strongly suggest that Toghril was being 'set up' by treacherous relations.[27] Grown to adulthood, he was acclaimed as leader of the Kereit but immediately came under pressure from his two jealous brothers. Toghril decided to eliminate these pretenders to his position, but the two escaped and sought refuge with Toqto'a Beki, the principal Merkit khan. It says something about the almost routine treachery on the steppes in this era that Toqto'a immediately surrendered them to Toghril, who executed them. Toghril's uncle, disgusted by his nephew's cruelty and egomania, publicly condemned him as a murderer. The uncle, hugely popular among the Kereit because of his obvious concern for their welfare – Toghril cared only for himself – called on the people to eject this tyrant, and they responded. Toghril was lucky to escape with his life and fled south to China with just one hundred followers.[28]

This was the unprepossessing individual Yesugei chose to ally himself with, against the strong and vociferous opposition of Qutula, who rightly argued that the policy was dangerous folly. At the very time the Borjigid were struggling to fight the Tartars and the Jin and contending with opposition within Mongol ranks from the Tayichiud, it made no sense to become inveigled into the politics of the Kereit realm.[29] Yesugei was unmoved and even went through the ceremony of *anda* (roughly blood-brotherhood) with Toghril. For seven years Toghril was forced to roam the frontier lands as a minion of the Jin. Finally, when he and Yesugei were strong enough, they invaded Kereit territory and overthrew the regime there, forcing Toghril's uncle to flee west for sanctuary to the Tangut realm of Hsi-Hsia (the north-western corner of modern China).[30]

But Yesugei's foolish involvement in Kereit politics did not complete the tally of his idiocy. He displayed his complete lack of political nous by starting a feud with the Merkit too. Two issues are salient here. The Mongols practised exogamy and would travel long distances to find a suitable wife, but were not averse to stealing women, even other men's wives or betrothed, if the opportunity presented itself. Yesugei meanwhile was a notorious womaniser who already had one official wife and a harem of bedfellows. Sometime in 1159–60 he took a fancy to a fifteen-year old girl named Hoelun, who was then engaged to the Merkit leader Yehe Chiledu, Toqto'a's brother, and abducted her in circumstances not entirely clear.[31] This act of grotesque irresponsibility set off a fifty-year feud between Mongols and Merkits. Yesugei's sons would thus inherit a vendetta which was none of their making but which honour and culture compelled them to carry on.[32]

With Hoelun Yesugei begat five children, four sons and a daughter: Temujin, born in 1162 (for the date see below); Qasar, born 1164; Qaci'un, born 1166; Temuge, born 1168; and the girl Temulun, born in either 1169 or 1170.[33] Yesugei already had two children from an official wife, whose name is disputed. There are also hints in the sources that this earlier wife might have been unfaithful.[34] The two sons from the previous marriage were Begter and Belgutei. It is typical of all things connected with the early history of the Mongols that there is no agreement on Hoelun's tribal origin. The consensus view is that she was from the Buriyat tribe, one of the forest peoples, and even today the Buriyats trace their ancestry to Genghis Khan's mother. Others say that the Buriyat connection is bogus, even though there is the circumstantial touch that Genghis's wife Borte was buried in their territory. On this view she was a member of the Olqunu'ud clan of the Ongirrad tribe, situated in the most easterly part of Mongolia.[35] This would impart some rationality to Yesugei's abduction of Hoelun, since the Ongirrad were the Mongols' favourite target for intermarriage, so much so that the Mongols referred to them as the 'consort tribe'.

Temujin, the future Genghis Khan, was born in 1162. This is the only date that makes sense of the other events in the sources, though some historians, beginning with Rashid al-Din himself, have opted for 1155. At the other extreme is the eccentric view that he was born in 1167, which would require an entire recasting of all other elements in the traditional narrative.[36] Nor is there any agreement on where he was born. One suggestion is that he was born in a valley called Gurvan Nuur, while another goes for Delun Boldog in Dadal, 350 miles north-east of modern Ulan Bator, a small village in Khenti province in the middle of beautiful forests, mountains and lakes, though this hypothesis seems to resonate far more with Plato's idea that a beautiful environment produces greatness than on any documentary evidence. The commonsense view is that he was probably born somewhere on the upper reaches of the River Onon, or possibly the Orkhon region, which is rich in game; Baljun Island (actually a peninsula on the Onon) and Mount Duyiran have been mentioned.[37]

Inevitably legends grew up about his birth, including the story that he was conceived when a ray of heavenly light was beamed into his mother's womb – a story remarkably like the Virgin Birth in

Christianity, as well of course as closely recalling the legend of Ah-lan the Fair and the birth of Bodonchar. The legend preserved in the Secret History is that he emerged from the womb clutching a clot of blood the size of a knuckle in his fist, which was read as a sign that he would be a great conqueror; there is a similar story about the birth of Tamerlane.[38] The name Temujin has puzzled scholars as it means 'blacksmith'. If taken seriously, this would push Yesugei even farther down the social scale. The true explanation is that Yesugei named him after a Tartar chieftain, Temujin Uge, whom he had just captured. The idea was to transfer the chief's power to the child, but to make this effective the man would have to be slain; the inference then is that Temujin's birth was celebrated with slaughter – appropriately enough, cynics might say.[39]

The boy was brought up in the traditional way, learning to ride at an early age and honing his skill at archery by shooting at birds. In the winter he sped over the ice on skates made from bone or wood, learned to track and hunt squirrels and pine martens, then graduated to bigger game such as deer. A soon as practicable he began learning the art of falconry, considered an indispensable skill for a would-be future leader. There was no education in our sense. Temujin never learned to read and write, and the later great emperor Genghis Khan remained illiterate. Notably strong, enduring and physically resilient, even so he began to be overhauled by his brother Qasar who is reported as a veritable Samson. As an adult Qasar had shoulders and chest so broad and waist so narrow that when he lay on his side a dog could pass under him.[40] Like Qutula, he was said to be able to snap a man in two like a twig, and soon became the most famous archer in the Borjigid. Perhaps this was why there was always hostility and jealousy between him and Temujin, who far preferred the self-effacing Qaci'un and his favourite brother Temuge. But the relationship that was most important to Temujin at this time was with a young aristocrat from the Jadarad clan named Jamuga. He and Jamuga played knucklebones together and, though their paths later diverged, both would remember the happy days of their childhood. It was a sad day for Temujin when Jamuga was taken elsewhere; he did not see him for another eight years. But even at the age of 6 or 7 they had taken the oath of *anda*, which supposedly created a bond more powerful than any mere blood tie.[41] The *anda* relationship among the Mongols was meant to unite clans, sub-tribes and even different tribes and nations, and was thus a political affair, unlike blood-brotherhood among, say, the Scythians or Vikings, which was a personal bond between individual warriors.[42]

Shortly after Jamuga's departure, when Temujin was nine, Yesugei decided he needed to betroth him to a prestigious girl. Mongols married early, and the earliest possible engagement of a son added to the prestige of family and clan.[43] The traditional tribe for Mongol intermarriage was the Ongirrad of south-eastern Mongolia. Also known as Torolkin or The Nations, supposedly Mongolised Turks, the Ongirrad had a complicated origin myth, lineage and general mythology, all of which have had anthropologists scratching their heads. According to Mongol mythology, the close ties of Mongol and Ongirrad were because they had the same family names, with the Mongols as the 'black' family and the Ongirrad the 'white'. They first appear clearly in history in 1129 when they attended a meeting called by Yelu Dashi, the founder of the kingdom of Qara Khitai.[44]

To reach the Ongirrad country from the Mongol homeland meant travel over mountains and then across the south-eastern corner of the Gobi desert. This was an entirely new experience for Temujin, whose rovings hitherto had been confined to the movement between summer and winter pastures along the valley between the Rivers Onon and Kerulen. The first part of the journey was at high altitudes amongst black rocks, thorny scrub and heathland. Yesugei and his party trekked past Mount Darkhan, camping by night at the side of lakes, where there was more chance of finding game. Passing through a variety of terrain that intrigued the young Temujin, they began the crossing of the Gobi. Yesugei explained that the desert held no terrors for him, since it was autumn, the horses were in good shape, and the warriors were used to crossing the desert at this time of year to raid the Chinese border (in present-day Gansu). True, there were water shortages, but if you dug about thirty feet down into the earth you could find ground water. Once out of the desert, the Mongols entered fertile country with rich pastures, orchards, fields of corn and millet, elm trees and oases of willow and poplar.

The traditional meeting place of the Mongols and the Ongirrad was between Mount Chegcher and Mount Chiqurgu.[45] Yesugei had already explained to Temujin some of the complexities of the Ongirrad connection. The Ongirrad were divided into two main clans, the Nirgin and the Bosqur. Although the Nirgin were usually considered the more important branch of the Ongirrads, it was the Bosqur and their chief Dai Sechen with whom they would be dealing.[46] Dai Sechen greeted them cordially, but his mood darkened when he heard Yesugei's proposal for marriage. Nomads of the higher class were supposed to pay for their brides. Although he had prestige as a chieftain, Yesugei was cash-poor and all he could offer Dai Sechen was a single horse as a down payment.[47] On the other hand, Ongirrad women were by common consent the most beautiful on the steppes, and Yesugei had already identified Dai Sechen's 10-year-old daughter Borte as the girl he wanted his son to marry.[48] Secretly indignant at Yesugei's poor offer, Dai Sechen raised difficulty after difficulty, intending ultimately to reject the suit after face-saving formalities had been completed.

Here for the first time Temujin's personal charm made its mark. Alchi-Noyan, the Bosqur leader's favourite son, took to Temujin almost immediately and begged his father to accept the Mongol boy into his family. Dai Sechen finally agreed to the match, but only after setting a very high price on his daughter's favours.[49] He would accept the horse as down payment, but Yesugei would have to come up with the balance before the marriage could proceed. In the meantime, he would keep Temujin with him and use his labour as 'interest' on the outstanding debt. The 'live-in son-in-law' phenomenon was common practice on the steppes when the bride-price could not be paid at once, but was usually restricted to the poor.[50] Though not averse to staying in Alchi-Noyan's company, Temujin was shamed by his father's poverty and angry that he was being used as a mere pawn in a dynastic marriage. He remarked scathingly later about his father's behaviour: 'To decide a marriage based only on the amount of wealth is almost like merchant's conduct.'[51]

Before Yesugei left on the homeward journey, Dai Sechen announced one morning that he had had a dream about a white gyrfalcon clutching the sun and moon together with puzzling appearances by Temujin, which he interpreted as a sign that his prospective son-in-law would rule the entire world.[52] This seems to have reconciled him to the impecunious boy, who appears to have spent a pleasant three years or so with the Ongirrad. The inference is that he worked as a drover or herder, for the steppe peoples did not abide idle hands. The period with Dai Sechen was formative. By gaining a close knowledge of a people geographically far removed from his own, it may be that Temujin was unconsciously building a good foundation for a man who would later rule an empire.[53] He learned many valuable lessons from the Ongirrad, noting how often steppe feuds began with debts, how vengeance was a paramount motif, and how vendettas enforced narrow bonds of kinship, identity and solidarity and were thus inimical to the needs of supertribalism.[54] He noted the burgeoning trade between the Ongirrad and the Chinese south of the Wall, where furs, hides, horses, ewes, wethers, camels, yaks and salt were sent south in return for lacquer, textiles, ivory, ornaments and iron weapons. Dai Sechen spoke of the wealth and power of the Jin empire but Temujin reasonably asked, in that case why did they simply not conquer the tribes on the steppe and take what they wanted without having to trade it? Dai Sechen replied that the Chinese were not a warrior breed, which set Temujin thinking they could be conquered by those who were.

But soon enough the halcyon days came to an end. When Temujin was about twelve, word came that Yesugei was dead. It seemed that on one of his raids, he encountered a large party of Tartars. The sides were evenly matched, and the outcome of armed combat would have been uncertain. The Tartars, however, had recognised one of their old enemies and baited a trap. Since the two sides had met on Tartar territory, they invited the Mongol chieftain and his men to a great banquet, but put slow-acting poison in his food.[55] The possibility of being poisoned was ever-present in the nightmare world of the steppe, but this had to be balanced against the terrible insult that would have been offered the Tartars if Yesugei had refused their hospitality. Shortly after leaving the camp he suffered agonising pains in his stomach, lingered a while, then died. Essentially he was a martyr to the nomads' code of honour.[56] With his dying breath, he ordered his faithful retainer Monglik to bring Temujin back home. His followers deeply mourned his death, and it may have been Monglik himself who composed the famous epitaph: 'The deep waters have dried up, the sparkling stone is shattered.'[57]

Monglik rode hard to the Ongirrad country and brought the news to Dai Sechen. The Ongirrat leader was reluctant to let Temujin go, not least because it left his daughter Borte in marital limbo, but he too was constrained by the mores of the steppe and had to allow the lad to depart for the River Onon.

Yesugei had recalled Temujin hurriedly because he knew that on his death the issue of succession would flare up again and, if his son was not there, no one would speak for him; as the French say, *les absents ont toujours tort*. But he could not have expected what took place. The first sign of trouble came when the widows of Ambaghai forbade Hoelun from attending the annual ceremonies to venerate the distinguished Tayichiud ancestor.[58] Hoelun then tried in vain to rally the Borjigid clan, asserting that she would lead them, but her clansmen declined the offer. They were influenced not so much by misogynistic contempt for a woman as by their unwillingness to have a twelve- or thirteen-year old as the principal male in the clan, and the rational calculation that, since Hoelun was not a *condottiere* like her husband, the amount of booty and loot, and hence their shares in it, would diminish alarmingly.

They also seem to have been displeased that Yesugei's youngest brother claimed Hoelun as wife according to the law of levirate, whereby a younger brother inherits his dead sibling's wife, but she turned him down. This man, Daritai, Bartan's fourth son, took the humiliation badly and began to conspire with the Tayichiud to destroy the Borjigid once and for all.[59] Chieftain after chieftain, clan after clan deserted Hoelun, and the first to go was the arrogant Targutai, leader of the Tayichiud, who announced that his clan had now resumed the leadership of the Mongols. The unkindest cut of all for Hoelun was that Monglik, appointed by Yesugei on his deathbed to be his children's guardian, also turned recreant. The rebels not only expelled the few remaining Borjigid as virtual outlaws but took all their movable property too.

Reduced to a half dozen horses and a handful of serfs and retainers, Hoelun and her family were now destitute.[60] They began to eke out a sorry existence on berries, roots, edible plants and small mammals like marmots and badgers. This enabled them to survive in summer but in winter the animals disappeared and the diet was reduced to plants, roots and boiled millet, fare which Hoelun and her family would have despised while her husband was alive. The family relied heavily on Qasar's skill with the bow and Temujin's expertise as a tracker. Survival of the fittest was one thing, but soon Belgutei and Begter, the bigger and stronger half-brothers from Yesugei's previous marriage, began to take the catches of Hoelun's sons, playing hyenas to their lions. Matters came to a head when Temujin and Qasar showed their versatility by catching a large fish (as we have seen, fishing was not a Mongol accomplishment and looked down on as the occupation of lesser beings).[61] Begter took the fish from them, cooked it and ate it. Coldly, Temujin plotted his half-brother's doom. He waited until Belgutei went fishing, then he and Qasar crept up on Begter and riddled him with arrows. In some accounts Begter is said to have known he was doomed, to have accepted the justice of his fate and faced death calmly.[62]

This murder, carried out when Temujin was thirteen or fourteen, shows both his supreme ruthlessness and his ability, even as an adolescent, to think through a long chain of causation. The homicide was justified by the unwritten code of the steppes which Begter had violated, but there was more to it than that. Temujin had identified Begter as a strong-willed rival whose claims to the Borjigid succession might be considered stronger than his, since he was Yesugei's eldest son.[63] He sensed no such threat from Belgutei, who seems always to have been a weak and submissive character, or possibly just a very clever survivor, as he lived into his nineties,an almost unheard-of old age for that era.[64]

Significantly Belgutei never sought to avenge his brother's death and became one of Temujin's most faithful followers. When he became khan of khans Temujin (as Genghis Khan) paid a graceful tribute to his comrades in those dark days with Hoelun: 'It is to Belgutei's strength and Qasar's prowess as an archer that I owe the conquest of the world empire.'[65] It was typical, too, of the Mongols that they always liked to use euphemisms for homicide; to murder and slay in battle thus became 'to abandon', 'to dismiss', 'to reject', 'to destroy the hearth'.[66]

But if Belgutei was meek and took the line of least resistance, Hoelun reacted with incandescent fury. She tore into Temujin and Qasar, making every disparaging comparison she could think of: dogs biting their afterbirth, panthers rushing over a cliff edge, angry lions, pythons with eyes bigger than their stomachs, gyrfalcons chasing their own shadows. How, she asked, could they ever hope to avenge themselves on the Tayichiud or the Tartars if they could not even make common cause with their half-brothers? 'You are like wolves, like mad dogs that tear their own flesh, like crazy young camels that attack their mother from behind, like vultures that madly swoop to attack rocks.'[67]

It may be that news of Begter's murder reached the Tayichiud, or perhaps they simply wanted to check that Hoelun's family really had pitchpoled into starvation and death. At all events they made a reconnaissance and found to their annoyance that the family was in fact relatively thriving. Targutai, the self-appointed leader of the Mongols, was shrewd enough to see that every day that passed made Temujin more of a threat to his position. The simplest solution was to kill him, but that would mean vendetta with his brothers, who would surely raise the entire Borjigid clan against him. If he killed them too, his credibility as a wise ruler of all the Mongols would be gone. The best solution would be to take Temujin out of the power equation altogether by enslaving him. The Tayichiud arrived at Hoelun's encampment in force but Temujin was fortuitously absent, away on a hunting trip. Targutai went out of his way to assure Qasar and his brothers that he meant them no harm, he was interested only in Temujin.[68] Again, for reasons of credibility, he had to justify the capture, to assure the Mongols that Temujin had done something bad enough to warrant punishment but not death. He hit on the murder of Begter, for whom he cared nothing, as the obvious pretext.[69]

But first he had to capture Temujin, which was no easy task. He threw a cordon around the woods into whose depths Temujin had fled once his brothers warned him what was afoot. For six days Temujin lay hidden, surviving on water alone. Finally, famished and desperate, he tried to break through the cordon and was caught. Targutai bore him in triumph to his headquarters then imprisoned him in a cangue. This was a heavy, flat board with a hole in the centre large enough for a man's head to be thrust through; the two pieces of the board were closed around the neck, then fastened along the edges with locks, and to make doubly sure the prisoner's hands were fastened to either side of the yoke. The opening in the centre was large enough to allow the captive to breathe and eat easily, though not large enough for the head to squeeze through, unless the punishment was intended to be severe, in which case the size and weight of the board made it impossible for the man to reach his mouth with his hands, leaving him at the mercy of passers-by to decide whether he should be helped to eat and drink. The sources imply that the cangue was of the lighter type, and Targhutai felt confident his prisoner could not escape. But he reckoned without the resourcefulness of Temujin. The Tayichiud had foolishly left a single youth to guard their captive. When the youth started to doze off, Temujin crept up on him, clubbed him and made his escape.[70] He could not travel far but hid in a river with reeds up to his neck, the cangue giving him buoyancy and acting as a kind of lifejacket. Soon the hue and cry was raised and there was a frantic search.

Temujin was always lucky, and so it proved on this occasion. Of all the men looking for him, the only one who saw him in the reeds was a Suldus tribesman named Sorqan Shira, a secret Borjigid sympathiser; the Suldus had been compelled to become vassals of the Tayichiud. Daringly Sorqan removed the freezing and starving youth to his tent, where he hid him under a heap of fleeces; in one version of the story Tayichiud searchers actually prodded the fleeces with lances without making contact. A soon as the questing hullabaloo had died down, Sorqan removed the cangue, gave Temujin food and drink, and equipped him with bow and arrows. Around midnight, as soon as the moon set, Temujin stole a horse and made his getaway. The fearful Sorqan Shira tried to ensure that Temujin would go straight back to his family by providing just enough food and no saddle for the horse.[71] But Temujin never forgot what Sorqan Shira did for him, and later in his career would reward him handsomely.

Biographers have sometimes claimed that the captivity with the Tayichiud was a deeply traumatic incident in the life of Genghis Khan but, the cangue aspect apart, this kind of thing was relatively common on the steppes. As we have seen, Toghril endured two such episodes early in life, while his brother Jaqa Gambu was for a long time a prisoner of the Tangut; Jamuga too endured the perils of servitude, with the Merkit.[72] How much time elapsed from his initial capture on the Onon to the escape with the help of Sorqan Shira is uncertain, but it cannot have been longer than a few months unless, as some scholars allege, the *Secret History* has telescoped into a short time span events that in reality lasted many years. It seems that the Tayichiud did try to recapture him, but Temujin skulked on the mountain of Burqan Qaldun, whose defiles, byways and hidden tracks were known only to the Borjigid. Legend says that in this wilderness he was fed by a gyrfalcon, just as the biblical Elijah was said to have been fed by ravens. Once the coast was clear and the Tayichiud abandoned their search, Temujin sought out his family, only to find them in a worse plight than ever, existing mainly on marmots, having lost all possessions except nine horses.[73]

By this time Temujin was fourteen, physically precocious and almost an adult male. One day, when he, Qasar and Belgutei were out hunting, a party of Tayichiud raiders swept into their camp and ran off all the horses; the only mount left to them was the one Belgutei happened to be riding in the forest. Temujin commandeered the steed, and set off in pursuit on the very evening of the raid. He tracked the Tayichiud successfully but could never catch up with them, as he had to rest his mare for long stretches.

On the fourth day of pursuit, his horse was on her last legs and he was tired and hungry.[74] Suddenly he encountered a youth about his own age named Bo'orchu. Temujin had the same magnetic effect on him as he had had on Dai Sechen's son. The youth declared himself Temujin's friend for life, provided him with food and drink and fresh mounts, in return for which he craved only the boon of accompanying his new friend. Another three days of hard riding brought the pair in sight of the raiders. Under cover of night, the intrepid youths recovered all the stolen horses, but immediately the pursuers became the pursued.[75] Temujin told Bo'orchu they had nothing to fear as they both had reserve horses, but he grew gloomily thoughtful as the vanguard of the pursuing Tayichiud began to gain on them.

However the overconfident Tayichiud now made the mistake of getting strung out, with their leader, mounted on a splendid stallion, riding farther and farther ahead of his comrades. Temujin was already well aware of the principle of local superiority in battle, and he pointed out to Bo'orchu that for a brief time they had a two-to-one advantage. The Tayichiud leader came closer and closer and soon began to uncoil his lasso, ready to rope in the youths. Bo'orchu now revealed himself to be a talented archer. Drawing his bow, he took careful aim and shot; the arrow ran true, pierced the Tayichiud in the breast and severely wounded him. When his comrades came up, they stopped to tend his wound, breaking off the pursuit.[76] Bo'orchu meanwhile took Temujin back to his father, Naqu Bayan, who provided him with a bodyguard for the trip back to the Onon. Bo'orchu went with him, pledging his friendship for life.[77] From this tiny kernel would grow a mighty oak.

With Bo'orchu's men, along with recruits made up of freelance Borjigid, who sensed a leader in the making, and renegade Suldus warriors sent secretly by Dai Sechen, Temujin slowly built up his position as young warlord. It is from this period that many of his legendary exploits date, such as the time he was ambushed alone by six brigands and killed them all.[78] On these raids he must have picked up enough riches to be able to redeem the bride price with Dai Sechen, for the next significant event in his life was a journey with Bo'orchu across the Gobi to claim Borte as his bride. We may place this event in the year 1177 or 1178. The sources claim that Dai Sechen greeted him enthusiastically, and this may well be true for, considerations of the bride price apart, his daughter was now sixteen and in danger of becoming by Mongol standards an old maid. Since the engagement between Temujin and Borte had been formally ratified years before, no other suitor would have come forward, nor would Dai Sechen have risked abandoning the time-honoured exogamous tie between Mongols and Ongirrad and making an enemy of the Borjigid, until all other remedies had been exhausted. Perhaps it was relief that the marriage was finally to take place which made Dai Sechen provide a 'dowry' in the shape of a sumptuous brownish-black sable coat.[79] Strictly speaking the sable was not a dowry at all, but a gift from Dai Sechen's wife Chotan to Hoelun, the groom's mother; this practice was a deeply ingrained part of Mongol marriage procedures. But Dai Sechen was content. He was now not just *quda* to Temujin – a potential father-in-law – but the real thing, with a good-looking, red-haired, broad-shouldered warrior as his son-in-law.

The wedding feast was celebrated with the usual ocean of koumiss. Dai Sechen boasted about his tribe's complex genealogy, according to which the Ongirrad were descended from an entity known as the Golden Vessel, and pointed out the Ongirrad's prowess in iron smelting.[80] There seems also to have been some sort of distant kinship link between Temujin and Borte, though this aspect is obscure.[81]

Dai Sechen was a stickler for the niceties in Mongol marriage customs, and therefore regarded himself as obliged to accompany his daughter back to the groom's homeland; mindful however of Yesugei's fate when he traversed hostile territory and ended up drinking poison, not to mention the fate of others such as Ambaghai, he drew the line at travelling the whole way back to the Onon. He appears to have left the wedding party on the far side of the Gobi (or maybe at the great bend of the Kerulen River) and then returned to his base, leaving his wife Chotan to continue the journey and present the sable to Hoelun. The party had a tough time of it, crossing the Kerulen to reach the River Senggur and then proceeding upstream to Temujin's camp.[82]

About two years elapsed, during which Temujin continued to build up the strength of his band of raiders. It was in this period that he received another of his famous recruits, Boroqul, who was soon second in the hierarchy only to Bo'orchu.[83] There are hints in the sources that Borte found it difficult to conceive, became depressed about this, and was comforted only when Temujin allowed her to adopt a Tartar boy named Shigi Qutuqu, taken on one of his raids.

Then disaster struck. The Merkit had not forgiven or forgotten Yesugei's seizure of Hoelun, when she had been affianced to Toqto'a Beki's brother. Ever since they had yearned for revenge, and some time in 1179–80 the opportunity came. A very large raiding party, at least 300 strong, located Temujin's camp and attacked it. The Mongols, heavily outnumbered, were taken completely by surprise, panicked and after no more than token resistance broke and fled. Temujin and his four brothers got away together with Hoelun, but Borte was left behind.

This was a shameful episode in Temujin's career, and the *Secret History* remarks enigmatically: 'there was no horse for Borte.'[84] It is clear that Temujin abandoned her. The only thing unclear is whether he did so in a cowardly panic or whether, as so often with him, there was method in his badness, that he left her as bait so that his men could get away. If so, the plan worked, for as soon as the Merkit laid eyes on Borte they abandoned all thought of pursuit.[85] Temujin and his men fled to Burqan Qaldun and gave thanks for their survival; Temujin ritually removed his belt so as to make total submission to the spirit of the sacred mountain.[86]

When the Mongols finally returned to their camp, they found a wasteland: tents, carts, herds, horses, women – all were gone. Some sources say that among the captured was Chotan, then on a visit to her daughter. At first Temujin thought the raiders were Tartars but from various hints and pieces of evidence worked out that they were Merkit. He realised that if he had been taken it would have meant death or the most dreadful form of slavery.[87] Beyond that, he realised he was now involved in a struggle to the death, for just as the Merkit had never forgiven Hoelun's abduction, so he now would never rest until he had had revenge for Borte's seizure. A new phase of history had opened, what one commentator has called a 'Trojan war on the steppes'.[88] Temujin realised he could not fight the three large clans of the Merkit on his own, so looked around for allies. The obvious candidate was Toghril, his father's *anda*, but to win him over Temujin would need all his guile. He proved fully equal to the task.

It was typical of Temujin always to approach a problem from several angles. His overture to Toghril was therefore couched at a number of different levels, appealing to the Kereit leader's greed, pride and sense of realpolitik. He began by offering him the sable coat which Chotan had brought for Hoelun; this was accepted with avidity. Then he swallowed his own pride and claimed that he wanted to be Toghril's adopted son. Next he reminded Toghril that he was his father's *anda* and how much Yesugei had done for him. Quite apart from the unflinching support Yesugei had given the Kereit leader during his struggle with his uncle and his seven-year exile, there was a second incident when Toghril's half-brother Erke Qara had staged a a coup and dethroned him; again it was only with Yesugei's help that he was restored.[89]

Having listened to all these arguments, Toghril promised to throw all his resources behind Temujin's campaign against the Merkit. Some critics have accused Toghril of gullible stupidity for listening to flattery and emotional blackmail and for being bedazzled by a sable cloak, but Toghril was not quite so foolish as that. Hard, realistic calculations indicated that an alliance with Temujin made a lot of sense. The Naiman, traditional enemies of the Kereit, were emerging as the dominant political force in Mongolia, and had built an alliance embracing Oyirad, Ongud, Merkit, Tayichiud and, most ominously, the Tartars, who by this time had fallen out with the Jin and aggressively repudiated their former role as the strong right arm of the Chinese on the steppes. Toghril was in danger of being isolated and encircled and, in addition to this 'foreign levy', he had malice domestic in the form of his frighteningly ambitious son the Senggum and his uncle, still waiting in the wings.[90] As an up-and-coming Mongol chieftain, who could attract many nomad warriors by his charisma, Temujin was a plant worth cultivating.

Toghril mobilised all his forces for a massive campaign which aimed to destroy the Merkit before their allies had time to help them. Some estimates of Kereit strength claimed they could put 500,000 warriors in the field but, although this is an absurd exaggeration, they were a populous and powerful tribe. Temujin joined Toghril in a massive sweep through Merkit territory. The 'coalition' crossed the Chikoy River and for months – probably in 1180–81 – were engaged in hard fighting.[91] The details are obscure, and the sources almost certainly muddle a number of different campaigns fought by Temujin against the Merkit, but the outcome was total victory for Toghril and Temujin. Toqto'a Beki and his brothers sustained very serious, if not yet mortal, losses and were forced to disperse as guerrilla bands. They would probably have been exterminated had not Temujin, to the chagrin of his allies, suddenly pulled out from the offensive, claiming his own losses were too heavy.[92] The reality was that Temujin, already in his mind revolving plans for the total domination of Mongolia, did not want the Kereit to become too powerful.

Borte was recovered and found to be pregnant, having been pointedly given as a prize to Chilger-boko, younger brother of the deceased Yehe Chiledu (from whom Yesugei stole Hoelun). Her mother had also been humiliated, having been maliciously handed over as 'wife' to a low-born Merkit; it was not the sexual defilement but the socially degrading match she found most galling. By what are described as 'various means' (torture?), Temujin discovered the identities of every last one of the original 300 raiders, executed them all and took their wives and concubines into slavery.[93] Borte's pregnancy was deeply embarrassing for Temujin, and he later ordered his court historians to rewrite history. Rashid-al-din, the Arab historian, swallowed their diaphanous propaganda, and produced a story that Borte was already pregnant when the Merkit captured her. According to this fiction, the Merkit immediately sent Borte to Toghril as a peace offering. When Temujin pulled out of the campaign, Toghril's counsellors advised him to rape Borte in revenge, but he simply sent her back to Temujin. The whole tale was an elaborate mesh of nonsense to cover up Borte's shame and the illegitimacy of the child she was carrying. Not even the *Secret History* was prepared to swallow such a tall story.[94] Nevertheless Borte's child by Chilger-boko, born in about 1182, was accepted by Temujin as his own and named Jochi.

One of the unlooked-for consequences of the war against the Merkit was that Temujin was reunited with his childhood friend Jamuga. Jamuga had long since thrown in his lot with Toghril, out of much the same consideration that drew Temujin to the Kereit leader, and, hearing that Temujin had been taken under the Kereit's wing, suddenly seems to have remembered he was his *anda*.[95]

Jamuga, now chieftain of the Jadarad, had had as tough an early life as his friend's. He had been captured and enslaved by the Merkit when very young, escaped, built up a band of warriors and then, calculating that the Merkit were much too strong to fight, offered fealty to Toqto'a Beki and was given amnesty for the earlier 'crime' of having escaped. It was a condition of the rapprochement that Jamuga could retain thirty men as a personal bodyguard. Supremely crafty, he wormed his way into Toqto'a's confidence, partly by insinuating (and it was probably true) that he was far more intelligent than his other counsellors.

A story told by Rashid-al-Din shows the young man in action. One day Jamuga spotted that a quail had made its nest in some long grass. He secretly marked the spot. Next day, when he was out riding with the officers of Toqto'a's inner circle, he suddenly pointed to the spot and said he remembered seeing a quail making a nest there a year ago, and wondered if any sign of it still survived. 'Let's see if it's still there and if the quail has produced any young,' he said with mock innocence. The Merkit officers approached the designated spot, at which the quail flew off, abandoning her young. The officers scratched their heads with astonishment. 'What kind of man can remember a patch of grass from one year to the next? He must be a supreme genius.'[96]

The story, when reported to Toqto'a, lost nothing in the telling. But this kind of magician's sleight of hand was simply an overture to the main *coup de théâtre* Jamuga was preparing. Noticing that the guards outside Toqto'a's tent were very lax and sloppy, Jamuga primed his men and burst in on an astonished Toqto'a. Jamuga explained quietly that he had only done it to show how incompetent the bodyguards were.[97] Toqto'a, who realised how easily he could have been slain in his bed, was relieved and grateful, but demurred when Jamuga said that in return for this signal service to the chief he now required a signed and witnessed charter of release from all obligations and fealties. The mood inside the tent turned ugly. Finally Jamuga said that Toqto'a's choice was simple: he could do as requested or die at once. Toqto'a realised Jamuga was not bluffing and took the choice for life.[98] It was clear to all observers that Jamuga was both as able and as cunning as Temujin, and many wondered what their reunion would bring.

There was one drawback to Jamuga's character that Temujin did not possess: he was a proud and irascible prima donna. He made clear his contempt for Qasar and Belgutei right at the beginning of the Merkit campaign when Temujin sent them as his envoys to propose a joint expedition.[99] He soon reinforced the impression of being a loose cannon. When arrangements were made for Toghril's 20,000 troops to link up with Temujin's levies at a rendezvous on the eastern side of Burqan Qaldun in the Khenti area, Jamuga refused to join them but insisted his allies come to him instead at the source of the Onon River, which meant that Toghril had to make two long journeys, one to link up with Temujin and the other to reach the mustering point with Jamuga. To the amazement of Temujin and Toghril, Jamuga brought almost as many warriors to the rendezvous as they had, then showed his independence by publicly rebuking Toghril and Temujin and his brothers for arriving three days late.[100]

Jamuga clearly enjoyed Temujin's snubbing Toghril by pulling out of the campaign before they had finished off the Merkit, and went with his *anda* after the split. The two withdrew to Jamuga's camp on the Onon, while Toghril made his way to his base on the River Tula, proceeding via the Hokortu valley in the Great Khenti.[101] There followed a memorable eighteen-month period, during which the two young men were inseparable, a kind of Oriental David and Jonathan. They exchanged golden belts and beautiful horses. Jamuga spoke sentimentally about their childhood memories, the games of knucklebones, and much else. They hunted together, drank together, wenched together, and, as the *Secret History* relates, 'At night they slept together under one quilt.'[102]

The entente is odd and puzzling, and not just because Jamuga had been noticeably cool towards his *anda* during the Merkit campaign.

Different nomad groups very rarely cohabited like this. It has been suggested that, to further his ambitions, Temujin needed the support of his friend, whose followers were at this stage far superior numerically, but what was Jamuga's motivation?[103] Borte, who never liked or trusted Jamuga, warned her husband that he was being used as a pawn in his friend's ambition – and Hoelun backed her in this opinion – but Temujin at first dismissed this as female pessimism and overcaution.[104]

Suddenly, after eighteen months of harmony, sweetness and light, probably in the year 1183, Jamuga went out of his way to pick a quarrel, speaking in a Delphic and enigmatic manner but seeming to imply that the interests of his horse-breeders were being sacrificed to those of Temujin's sheep-breeders.[105] This reflected the fact that Temujin, even after the success against the Merkit, was still relatively horse-poor.

What can explain the outburst? Some have taken it at face value, as an obscure dispute about pasturage, with Jamuga possibly under pressure from his followers who felt Temujin was getting the better of the entente. Others claim that Jamuga was reprimanding his comrade for being too absorbed in the arts of peace when they should be considering war to fulfil their vaulting ambitions. The most bizarre suggestion, popular among Soviet historians in the early twentieth century, was that Temujin and Jamuga represented antagonistic elements in a primitive class war, with Temujin siding with the aristocrats and Jamuga as the people's champion.[106] The problem with this interpretation is that the exact opposite seems to have been the case. It was always a strength of Temujin's that he promoted his officers by meritocracy, whereas Jamuga stuck with the old oligarchic modalities. We are left then with only a few possibilities. Either Jamuga was expressing some esoteric, quasi-Gnostic sentiment, whose meaning was known only to a few at the time and is now lost to us. But in that case why would Temujin himself describe the outburst as a riddle?[107] The other is that Borte was right, Jamuga was biding his time until he felt confident enough to show his hand openly and that when he spoke he had finally decided that Temujin was no further use to him. On this view Jamuga was offering Temujin a choice of responses but, whatever he said, Jamuga intended to disagree with him.[108] A final possibility is that the two men were playing a very deep game. At the profoundest level the split was about which of them would be the man to reunite the entire Mongol nation.

Whatever the explanation, the differences were clearly irreconcilable. Temujin and his immediate family and supporters stole away at night and set up their base at the River Kimurkha. Shortly after the sudden and unexpected rupture, all the clans of the Mongol nation except the Tayichiud held a supreme council, where divided opinions were immediately apparent. The division was mainly by age: the tribal elders wanted to create a new federation of clans with Jamuga as the leader, but the younger warriors opposed this.

The attraction of Temujin was that he had created a haven for all who had broken away from the rigidities of the old kinship-based clan structure. The chaos on the steppes since the early 1160s, with the Tayichiud–Borjigid feud, Tartar incursions on behalf of the Jin, Merkit raiding and a power struggle between Kereit and Naiman, had created a kind of war of all against all, as in Hobbes's formulation, where life was cheap, herds were stolen or slaughtered and horses ridden to death by juvenile yahoos. Rebelling against the ties of kinship, ancestor worship, respect for elders and all traditional mores and folkways, young Mongols had welcomed Temujin as a breath of fresh air, a leader whose charisma depended on military victory and loot: one who, so to speak, delivered the goods instead of talking about them.[109] The downside was an increase in machismo and violence, with armed robbery and rape regarded as evidence of superior masculinity. For the young, talk of a new confederation meant simply the old wine in new bottles and they wanted none of it.

The upshot was a violent break between supporters of Jamuga and those who backed Temujin. Jamuga told anyone who would listen that the rift with Temujin was not of his doing, that the real behind-the-scenes villains were Temujin's uncles Altan and Quchar, who had always hated him. The sources speak of 13,000 warriors opting to take their chance with Temujin, though one must always beware of exact figures quoted in Mongol sources, which are notoriously unreliable.[110] Temujin, already showing the high flair for organisation and administration that was so marked a characteristic of his, divided his followers into thirteen units or 'camps'. He, his sons, bodyguards and intimates formed one of these; his brothers and their men another; and the rest of the warriors were temporarily assigned by clans – the Jurkin, the Baya'ud, the Jalayir, the Ba'arin and so on. What was notable was that some of Jamuga's previously loyal allies sided with Temujin, a sign

they thought he would eventually win the struggle.[111] All of these thirteen units Temujin honed to a pitch of military readiness, soon making them something far more than part-time soldiers. Temujin encouraged the units to compete with each other and even staged mock battles, some of which got out of hand and caused real bloodshed. Temujin also adumbrated some of his later famous reforms, appointing trusted men as 'quiver bearers' and 'sword bearers' and nominating stewards in charge of victuals, beverages, sheep, horses, tents and wagons. Another of his innovations was to pitch camp not in the old informal way with gers stretched out in a grid, but to form a laager, circling the wagons and tents in a concentric pattern with the chieftain and his family in the centre.[112]

Temujin's energy in this period contrasts with the somewhat inert performance by his rivals. The Toghril of this era appears in the sources as a treacherous, venal ingrate, flabby, dull if basically good-natured, weak and temperamentally prone to compromise, which his enemies invariably construed as weakness.[113] Jamuga, unquestionably a man of great ability and, within the limits of traditional steppe codes, a stickler for probity and integrity, was an intriguer and a short-termist, treacherous and volatile, notorious for jettisoning friends suddenly and brutally. Although at one level he held all the cards, with the support of the Tayichiud, Jeljud, Arulad and the Nirgin Ongirrad, the long-term weakness in his position was that while Temujin was trying to build a holistic *esprit de corps* in his, Jamuga maintained traditional tribal divisions in his, assigned commands by social rank not merit, and refused to do as Temujin did, recruiting shepherds into the officer class, because he considered them *infra dig*.[114]

Another advantage Temujin had was the sheer quality of the personnel he had attracted to his standard. Most of the senior members of the Borjigid aristocracy had rallied to him, even his paternal uncle Daritai who never liked him. There was Sacha Beki, the great-grandson of Qabul and chief of the Jurkin clan (both the Jurkin and the Borjigid claimed descent from Qabul Khan), his brother Taichu, Quchar Beki, son of Yesugei's elder brother Negun Taishi, and Altan Otchigin, son of Qutula – which meant Temujin had the support of the heirs of the last two rulers of a united Mongol nation, even though it is likely that at this juncture they supported him because they thought him malleable and easier to handle than a loose cannon like Jamuga. There was danger too in their adherence, for all the older men would have a better claim as khan of the Borjigid than Temujin.[115] One of them was the hugely ambitious Qorchi of the Ba'arin, who joined Temujin after claiming to have seen heavenly omens predicting him as the future great khan of the Mongol nation. Temujin was pleased both with his support and his eulogy and promised that, if victorious, he would grant Qorchi his own regiment. The lustful Qorchi replied that in addition to this he wanted thirty personally handpicked young women of superlative beauty; this too was granted.[116] Even the two-faced Monglik changed sides and came back to him.

Still more impressive were the meritocrats Temujin gathered around him. Bo'orchu's younger brother left the Arulad to join the cause, while from the Uriangqai tribe of the forest peoples came one of Temujin's star recruits, Jelme, son of Jarchigudai, a blacksmith.[117] The great future general Muqali, still in his late teens, joined up, praising Temujin as the great one promised by his people's legends.[118] Yet another future military genius was recruited through Jelme's good offices. He had a young brother, Subedei, who came to Temujin's camp when he was just ten years old, a starry-eyed boy who had spent all his life among the reindeer in the taiga and had never seen the steppe before. He had none of the riding, hunting and fighting experience of the usual Mongol boy; his only skill was ice-skating.[119] But he was highly intelligent and a 'quick study'. Employed as a factotum, with a special brief to guard Temujin's tent, he swiftly picked up all the necessary skills for a Mongol warrior. To an extent of course he rose on the coat-tails of his brother Jelme, whom Temujin always expressly mentioned as second in the hierarchy only to Bo'orchu.[120] Temujin was a notable talent-spotter and encouraged synergy among his followers, exhorting the most intelligent to get together and 'brainstorm' on particular issues; he liked to steer Belgutei towards Bo'orchu for this purpose.[121]

Such was the euphoria in Temujin's devoted band that in 1186 they elected him khan of the Borjigid, a signal honour. Sacha Beki, Altan and Quchar were the prime movers in this endeavour, in a classic recognition of necessity. Both Quchar and Altan were offered the khanate first and Temujin made it a point of understanding that he would put himself forward only if they declined the honour. Both did so, and the reasons were clear. They were irremediably tainted with

the catastrophe at Lake Buir in 1161 and, in any case, realised that whoever held the formal leadership of the tribe, Temujin would certainly be the power behind the throne. They had switched from Jamuga, whom they deemed too powerful, thinking they could manipulate Temujin, and by now had realised their mistake.[122] Besides, Temujin had all the credentials for khan: he had proved his military talent in the campaign against the Merkit; he enjoyed the favour of Toghril and the Kereit, as no other claimant to the khanate did (Toghril formally endorsed it);[123] and he was very popular because he had enriched his followers with herds and other booty.

Nevertheless, the oath taken to the new khan by his followers bound them to be loyal to him only in war and on the hunt and to give him first pick of captive women; in no sense did they accept him as a feudal overlord – this would not come till twenty years later. The election as khan had great symbolic importance, however, despite the absence of the Tayichiud and other powerful clans. Temujin was the first khan to have 'gained the purple' by an unconventional route. He was neither a hereditary ruler nor one acclaimed by popular mandate, and he was always only a khan on probation; even those who swore limited fealty would desert at the first sign of trouble. He was an outsider who had risen to the top against all the odds and from an unconventional starting point. Lacking a secure base of tribal support, still clearly Toghril's junior partner, with no tradition or model of a steppe empire to build on (the last steppe empire, that of the Uighurs, had disappeared nearly four hundred years earlier), Temujin was very much launching into the unknown. To gain the solid political base he needed he would have to win more victories in the field, and this meant he would have to take great risks to do so.[124] It was this factor alone that nearly brought his career to a juddering halt.

3

The Rise and Rise of Temujin

The year 1186 was a joyous one for Temujin. Not only was he khan of the Borjigid but his wife presented him with a second son, Ogodei – the first one Temujin had truly sired with her. But he was not allowed to remain at peace for long. Jamuga had viewed his ascent with disquiet and may have been looking for a pretext to put his *anda* in his place. The *casus belli* came the following year. Jamuga's brother Taichar stole some valuable horses from Temujin's friend Jochi Darmala, who retaliated by shooting him dead with an arrow.[1] Jamuga took this as a declaration of war by the Borjigid, assembled his host and marched against them. The sources say that he had 30,000 men ranged against Temujin's 13,000. These numbers are exaggerated at least threefold, but it is easily credible that Jamuga outnumbered Temujin three to one. A terrible, murderous battle took place at Dalan Baljut ('seventy marshes'), an unknown location possibly on the Kerulen near the source of the Senggur.

Jamuga won the day, but it was a pyrrhic victory which gave him pause.[2] A lukewarm pursuit managed to bottle up Temujin in a defile near the Onon but Jamuga, displaying the half-heartedness always in evidence whenever he had Temujin on the ropes, did not press his advantage and allowed his rival to escape. He did, however, become notorious for an alleged atrocity immediately afterwards. Angry with the Jurkin clan for having joined Temujin, he is said to have boiled seventy of their senior members alive.[3] There have long been suspicions that the 'boiling' story was simply Borjigid propaganda; one suggestion is that Jamuga actually made a ritual sacrifice of seventy wolves.[4]

Whatever the truth of this incident, Dalan Baljut seems to have wrecked Temujin's position overnight. The tale in the sources that the boiling so alienated many of Jamuga's followers that they deserted

and joined Temujin is probably the *Secret History*'s clumsy attempt to mask the fact that large numbers actually deserted Temujin. It is surely significant that after the battle the sources abandon the narrative trail and 'cut' cinematically to the year 1195.

This historical lacuna has been explained in various ways. Some say the entire account of Temujin's early life in the *Secret History* and the work of Rashid al-din is a jumble of incorrect dates and sequences, that the events recounted took place over a much longer time span, and this is the explanation for the blank space dealing with the years 1187–1195.[5] Others, more convincingly, argue that Temujin in effect returned to square one and had to begin the laborious process of building up military strength all over again. On this view he may have acted as a captain of guerrillas on behalf of the Jin, who had begun to grow disillusioned with their Tartar gendarmes, but this fact was suppressed because it tarnished his legend. Or, more plausibly, he may have actually gone to China as an exile, become a client of the Jin, and lived there for eight years, waiting for his hour to strike.[6]

Whatever interpretation we opt for, it is clear that in these years Temujin suffered a series of misfortunes which did not redound to his credit. Moreover, his eclipse dragged Toghril down as well. Without Temujin, he was not strong enough to contend against a legion of enemies, including the Naiman, the Tartars, the Merkit, the Tayichiud and his own uncle and brother. Soon after Temujin's departure south, he too was forced into exile. Some say he joined Temujin with the Jin for the entire period, but better evidence suggests a more complicated pattern of roving. Toghril's position as leader of the Kereit was always shaky because of the unregenerate hostility of his brother and his uncle Erke Qara, essentially an agent of the Naiman.[7] Shortly after Dalan Baljut he was ousted in a coup. He may have gone to Jin China initially, but his ultimate destination was the westerly kingdom of Qara Khitai. Once there he somehow raised an army of rebels against the ruler but was defeated and forced to flee. Moving eastwards with a band of desperadoes, he plundered the land of the Uighurs before coming to rest in the Tangut kingdom of Hsi-Hsia. Possibly using family contacts (one of his brothers had spent many years with the Tangut) he made a secure base there: some records in fact show him as having been in Hsi-Hsia twice, once on the way to Qara Khitai and again on his way back.[8] The Tangut initially received him hospitably but he outstayed his welcome when his famished followers started plundering the locals. Eventually expelled from Hsi-Hsia too, he wandered back to Mongolia where he eked out a living as a mountain bandit. The one aspect of Mongolian history in the years 1187–95 which no historian has ever explained is why, with his two principal rivals out of the reckoning, Jamuga did not establish an ironclad hegemony there. Perhaps Targutai and the Tayichiud, or more likely the Naiman, were simply too powerful.

Meanwhile in China Temujin bided his time. Almost the only witness we have for these years that the locusts ate is the biography of Subedei, who was eleven when the time of exile began and nineteen when it ended. During these years the youth evinced both self-effacement *and* ambition. It is likely that, as a protégé of Jelme, he was present at Mongol staff conferences and acquired a unparalleled insight into war planning and the human psychology involved.[9] That he went out of his way to make himself agreeable to Temujin is evident from the *Secret History*. This is how he offered his services to the exiled Borjigid khan:

> I'll be like a rat and gather up others. I'll be like a black crow and gather great flocks. Like the felt blanket that covers the horse, I'll gather up soldiers to cover you. Like the felt blanket that guards the tent from the wind, I'll assemble great armies and shelter your tent.[10]

Temujin's restoration to prominence in Mongolia owed much to the rift between the Jin and the Tartars. The relationship had always been an uneasy one, for the Tartars would sometimes turn on their overlords and loot their property if they were disappointed with the outcome of a raid. In 1195 the Jin had earmarked the Ongirrad as a target for a pacification campaign, for unknown reasons but possibly because this tribe was uncomfortably close to the northern Chinese frontier and had been showing disturbing signs of wanting to jettison their status as Jin vassals. The Jin recruited the Tartars as their allies for this campaign. The Ongirrad were defeated but an overweening Tartar leader named Sechu complained bitterly about the Jin's sharing out of the spoils. The upshot was a pitched battle between the Jin and their auxiliaries. The Tartars were defeated and driven north, but the Jin had lost so many men in the fighting that the Ongirrad seized their chance and rose again. In February 1196 they defeated the Jin army.[11]

Temujin, who had his ear to the ground, proposed that he and his men take the place of the Tartars, pacify the Ongirrad and then take the war to Sechu and his rebels. It seemed that he requested that the Jin emperor formally recognise him as an ally, but the 'Son of Heaven' ignored this impertinent request from a mere barbarian. Temujin then repeated the offer to the Chinese frontier commander, who was not so squeamish and was actually in a desperate plight. A joint Jin-Mongol punitive expedition went north, caught up with the Tartars, and heavily defeated them in a series of running battles in the Uldza valley; the important Tartar princeling Meguzhin was killed in one of these engagements.[12]

At last Temujin could feel he had avenged his father. The amount of booty taken was staggering. As his personal treasure trove Temujin set aside a cradle made of silver and some sumptuous blankets decorated with large pearls.[13] Hearing of his adopted son's great triumph, Toghril saw the chance for restoration and sent a message asking for a meeting. The two men met at a secret location[14] to which Temujin had ridden hard from the source of the Kerulen. The fortunes of the two had changed radically: Temujin now had the power and Toghril was the suppliant and indeed almost destitute. But Temujin was magnanimous: he took Toghril into his camp, fed him lavishly and promised he would restore him. It seems there was still some hard fighting to come with the anti-Toghril faction among the Kereit, but by 1197 he was restored as their leader.[15]

The Jin commander on the frontier, Wan-yen Hsiang, after conferring with the emperor, announced that his allies were to be rewarded for their suppression of the Tartars with official Chinese titles. Far the grandest was that received by Toghril, who received the title of prince or Ong Khan; Temujin received a much lesser honour. Here was considerable irony, for Toghril ended up the beneficiary of events in which he took no part, while the real author of victory was given an honour equating to 'commander' in Chinese.[16] The question arises: why did the Jin, who presumably knew exactly what had transpired, confer such an honorific title while downgrading Temujin? One answer sometimes given is that Toghril was named as Ong Khan much later for some other service (but its nature is never specified). The most likely explanation is that the Jin had already noted Temujin's formidable abilities and did not trust him not to become a second Sechu, whereas they knew Toghril of old, he was considered reliable as their eyes and ears in Mongolia, and was a tried, tested and known quantity. Whatever the Jin thought and whatever snubs they gave Temujin, the fact remained that he was now a more important political player in Mongolia than Toghril and would prove himself far the intellectual, strategic and political superior to his nominal overlord in the land of the Kereit.[17]

Several important consequences flowed from the triumphant campaign against the Tartars. First, having vanquished one mortal enemy, Temujin felt strong enough to attack another, the Merkit, who had enjoyed a considerable revival during his absence with the Jin. In 1197 he decided to blood the 21-year-old Subedei in his first independent campaign. Subedei surpassed all expectations. He volunteered to go into the Merkit camp as a spy and carried off the deception so plausibly (it helped that he was not a Mongol) that he came back with the complete Merkit war plan.

The result was an easy victory.[18] As a young adult Subedei was already a total master of warfare, with a thorough grounding in staff work and a positive genius for tactics, strategy and, especially, grand strategy. Marrying a first-class mind with the soul of a gambler (rather like Napoleon), Subedei was also a specialist in dispersal, rapid mobilisation and concentration, ensuring that he would always have local superiority in numbers at any given time.

Temujin made a point of giving 90 per cent of the spoils from this campaign to Toghril, to set him on his feet again.[19] With both Tartars and Merkit cowed, Temujin took the opportunity to winkle out all traces of internal opposition. He had long experienced trouble with the Jurkin clan, led by Sacha Beki, who, he told his confidants, were 'fierce, arrogant, heartless and men of gall'.[20] There had been one spectacular instance of insubordination; the maddening vagueness of the *Secret History* over dates does not allow us to pin it down to a specific time, but it may have been during the years of exile in China. The incident took place at a banquet and was the consequence of a spat between women. Qorijin, Sacha Beki's mother and Qu'urcin, wife of the chieftain Sorqatu claimed there had been an egregious breach in the etiquette of precedence, in that the wife of Belgutei, Temujin's half-brother, had been served ahead of them.[21] Since Sacha Beki and his entourage, which included their champion Buri-boko, were drunk, they got sucked into the dispute and started insulting and even physically pummelling members of Temujin's inner circle. Soon there was a genuine donnybrook, with pots, pans and kettles being hurled, fists flying, branches ripped from trees to serve as weapons and warriors wielding leather buckets of koumiss as if they were war-axes or maces. Buri-boko actually wounded Belgutei in the shoulder, sending Temujin into a rage. Belgutei, always the diplomat, assured his half-brother that it would be stupid to break up the alliance over a flesh wound, but Temujin refused to turn the other cheek; he called for his bodyguard who drove the Jurkin from the feast with tree branches.[22]

Temujin was particularly incensed by the behaviour of Buri-boko, who was, to make matters worse, a renegade Borjigid. Thinking himself superior to Temujin's entourage and even the khan himself, he had allied himself with Sacha Beki and Taichu, Numbers One and Two in the Jurkin hierarchy, and had been promptly promoted to Number Three. In Temujin's eyes he was already guilty of treason. By allying himself with the Jurkin, he had gone above Temujin's head and promoted himself from junior to senior rank. This was a much graver offence than the overweening self-belief that had drawn him to the supremely arrogant Sacha Beki and Taichu. And there was now the wounding of Belgutei and the melee at the banquet to enter into the ledger. Buri-boko was already a marked man.[23]

Temujin bided his time, waiting for an opportunity to settle accounts with the Jurkin. The chance came with the joint expedition with the Jin against the Tartars in 1196. Sacha Beki and his kin turned up late for the rendezvous and found that Temujin had already departed. Temujin proclaimed that the Jurkin were deserters and were to be arrested on sight. He ordered that Sacha Beki and Taichu be executed on the grounds that they had violated the oath taken when they elected him khan a dozen years earlier; part of the agreement was that they would never desert him in wartime on pain of death.[24] In vain did Sacha and Taichu protest that no one had ever been killed for being late before, and that Temujin himself had famously arrived late for a rendezvous with Jamuga and been merely berated by him for it.[25]

Charges and countercharges flew thick and fast. Temujin announced that Sacha Beki's non-participation in the Tartar war had created a gap in his line, through which the Tartars had penetrated, attacked his headquarters and killed ten guards. Sacha Beki replied that this was nonsense: it was actually Naiman who had attacked the camp. According to Sacha Beki, he himself saved the day, routed the enemy and displayed consummate loyalty (the ten slain men, he claimed, were actually Naiman, and he had sent another fifty or so prisoners on to Temujin, first stripping them of their clothes).[26] Temujin was not to be appeased. He made sure that Toghril was on his side, telling him that Sacha Beki and the Jurkin were disloyal to the point of secession. Then he sent out a powerful force to deal with them. Sacha Beki and the senior Jurkin fled, taking their families with them, but Mongol pursuits were known to be tireless and implacable. After several months on the run, the Jurkin were brought to bay (possibly near the confluence of the Rivers Kerulen and Senggur) and slaughtered. Temujin had decreed that since the oath taken by Sacha Beki when he (Temujin) was elected khan was no ordinary oath, the punishment had to be correspondingly severe. He expressly denied him and Taichu the usual aristocratic privilege of a bloodless death, and they were executed with the sword.[27]

Concealing the fate of his masters from Buri-boko, Temujin invited him to a wrestling match with Belgutei in his tent. Everyone knew that Buri-boko was unbeatable as a wrestler but, sensing danger from Temujin's black looks, Buri allowed himself to be thrown by Belgutei. At this Temujin bit his lip – a prearranged signal to Belgutei. He leapt upon Buri and broke his back.[28] Temujin evinced a savage vengefulness. He had not forgotten the insult at the feast when Buri wounded Belgutei and had set it up so that his half-brother was the executioner.

Quite apart from his long-running irritation at the ambivalence of Sacha Beki, the latter was a potential pretender as khan, so it made good political sense to take him out. Naturally Temujin did not reveal this motive but claimed he acted against the Jurkin unwillingly, at Toghril's urging; he was clearly a master of all the Machiavellian political arts.[29] Moreover, by acting so drastically against a man who was, after all, his cousin (Sacha Beki was the grandson of the eldest brother of Temujin's grandfather) Temujin showed that he was already moving beyond traditional Mongol modalities and introducing a new kind of militarised leadership. Nevertheless, the holocaust of the Jurkin

was not popular in the ranks of the coalition. Many felt that Temujin had exhibited both cruelty and an unsure touch. It is clear that even fifty years later the Mongol court historians were uneasy about this incident and went into propaganda overdrive to attempt to point up Sacha Beki's unique treachery and wickedness.[30]

It was important to Temujin's long-term ambitions for the conquest of Mongolia that he should have Toghril as a reliable ally, but the latter's position as ruler of the Kereit was precarious. Temujin tried to consolidate Toghril's position by reconciling him with his second brother Jaqa Gambu; the other brother, Erke Qara, was a long-standing enemy who could never be won round. Jaqa Gambu had great prestige among the Naiman as head of the Tubegen and Dungkhait clans but had been dragged down when Toghril was ousted and, like so many nomad leaders, went into exile in China. Temujin sent an armed escort to bring him back, showed him every honour, and presided over a banquet where he felt he had achieved rapprochement between the two brothers.[31]

Toghril soon proved himself a deep-dyed ingrate for, feeling that his position was now secure, in 1198 he campaigned against the Merkit without informing Temujin and, what was worse, offered him none of the spoils – in contrast to Temujin's generosity in a similar position in 1196. This was a blatant insult as the campaign had been a great success; the Kereit killed Toqto'a Beki's son, captured his two brothers and daughters and the rest of the family and further diminished the Merkit's dwindling stock of warriors. Secretly enraged at this perfidy, Temujin kept his thoughts to himself; he still needed Toghril as a stepping stone to supreme power, so swallowed the insult.[32]

The obvious next target for Temujin and Toghril was the powerful Naiman people. In 1199 they persuaded Jamuga to join them in striking at the Naiman khan Buiruk. They all agreed this was an ideal time to make their move, for the once mighty Naiman were now divided. Their great ruler Inanch, who had kept the Kereit permanently off balance by his intrigues with Erke Qara and the successful coup against Toghril, had died recently but in his deathbed bequest divided his realm between his two sons Buiruk and Taibuqa (Tayang Khan), who were now at each other's throats. Steppe gossip said they were both in competition for the same woman, but the reality was that Buiruk felt that his father had insulted him by bequeathing him only the mountainous region of the Altai while his brother got the more desirable steppe area around the Black Irtysh.[33]

Jamuga, following his habitual practice, managed to absent himself from the expedition against Buiruk but Temujin and To'orghul achieved signal success, defeated Buiruk at Lake Kishil Bash on the northern slopes of the Altai and sent him scuttling across the mountains. It seems that this part of the campaign had had the tacit connivance of Tayang but, seeing his brother's rout, Tayang had second thoughts about his own judgement. Temujin and To'orghul were returning home after their victory when they were suddenly confronted by a fresh Naiman army under their best general, Koksu-Sabrak. This was at the Bayidaragh River in the southern foothills of the Khangai range. The two armies formed up, and a fierce battle began, but night supervened, so both sides prepared for renewal of the conflict next day.[34]

To his consternation, during the night Temujin learned that Toghril had pulled out and taken his forces with him. The rumour was that Jamuga had appeared and persuaded Toghril (quite falsely) that Temujin was secretly in league with the Naiman and intended to desert him.[35] Toghril thought he had left Temujin as an easy sacrifice for the Naiman but next morning Koksu-Sabrak, instead of pursuing the fleeing Mongols, turned, overtook Toghril and routed him in a pass in the Khangai. Toghril's son Ilkha (the Senggum) lost his wife, children and bodyguard, while at least half of the Kereit army was either slaughtered or enslaved and vast amounts of cattle and other supplies taken as booty.[36]

Ilkha went to his father and begged him for revenge. Toghril appealed to Jamuga, who predictably turned him down. He then turned to Temujin, the man he had seemingly abandoned to certain death by his desertion in the Khangai. Temujin responded, apparently magnanimously; in reality, having weighed up the consequences, he had decided that the extinction of Kereit power would make the Naiman too powerful. He sent out his best units with his best generals: Bo'orchu, Boroqul, the rising star Muqali, another leading warrior Chila'un, and Temujin's brother Qasar.[37] This expedition was notably successful. The Mongol reinforcements reached Ilkha just at the moment he was on the point of losing a second battle and saved him from annihilation. The Naiman were first driven off, then expelled from Kereit territory, most of the uplifted cattle were recovered and, to crown the achievement, Qasar won a great battle against the retreating enemy.[38]

This time Toghril appeared suitably grateful. He and Temujin held a council of war to decide their next move, and it was agreed that they should finish off what remained of the Merkit and settle accounts with the Tayichiud, still a major threat on the steppes and, ominously, allied to Jamuga. Any hesitation was ended when Temujin's spies brought word that the Tayichiud Angqu Huquchu had actually achieved a Merkit–Tayichiud alliance. In 1200 Temujin heavily defeated this coalition on the banks of the Onon and took thousands of women and children captive, even though the victory was not as complete as he would have liked. His old enemy Targutai, now fat and elderly, was captured and absurdly seemed to have expected amnesty; he, together with all the Tayichiud notables, was executed. He was sliced in two by one of Temujin's stars, Chila'un; Angqu Huquchu escaped.[39]

The run of unbroken success since 1196 was soon clouded by yet more internal turmoil among the Kereit. Toghril went on his travels again, this time ousted in a coup by Jaqa Gambu, whom Temujin, ironically, had brought back to guarantee stability. It seems that Jaqa Gambu was always uneasy and ambivalent about his brother's closeness to Temujin and his own role as underling to Toghril and intrigued against him behind his back. The Naiman saw a chance to retaliate for the humiliations of 1199 and provided all necessary backing. Toghril is next heard of in Manchuria, wandering there as disconsolately as he had previously prowled in Hsi-Hsia and Qara Khitai.[40]

Temujin's enemies seized their chance. By now it was clear to everyone that, not content with being the kingmaker on the steppes, he was aiming at supreme power in Mongolia. Alarmed at Temujin's ambitions and the way he was destroying the traditional way of life on the steppes, the old guard of the Mongol and wider nomadic aristocracy acted decisively. A conference was called on the Ergune River. The delegates convened, resolved their differences, then moved along the river to the confluence with the River Gan where, on a promontory, they elected Jamuga as gur-khan – supreme ruler or universal khan – and then swore a mighty oath of allegiance to him. They conferred the title of gur-khan as a deliberate snub to Temujin. It was pointed out that it was a grander title than his, that this one had true legitimacy, whereas Temujin's title of khan was a mere family affair.

What was novel about this meeting was that it brought together disparate nomadic elements and tribes hitherto hostile to each other. Apart from Jamuga himself and the Jaijirad, fifteen tribes were represented, including the Oyirad, Ongirrad, Merkit, Ikires, Saljiut, Qadagin, Qorolas, plus the three distinct factions of the Tayichiud, the three main clans of the Tartars and, significantly, the two sections of the divided Naiman kingdom.[41] This was the first time the three-way rivalry between Jamuga, Temujin and Toghril threatened to turn from tribal fighting into something altogether more serious: a Mongolian civil war. The other important aspect of the confederation was that it represented the last throw by the traditional oligarchy, and could thus be viewed – with a bit of licence – as a kind of class war.[42] All those who elected Jamuga stood for the old values, the old privileges, the old hierarchies, the old way of life. The electors at the Ergune River believed in loyalty and respect to a 'natural' lord, but those who wanted a life of qualified allegiance, greater freedom and self-interest would stand with Temujin, many of whose warriors were young men bitter and disillusioned by the way they had been treated by the elders or chiefs in their family or clan. The tide of history clearly favoured Temujin, for the old clan system was breaking down and, in a contest between traditional loyalties on one hand and meritocracy on the other, it seemed clear that the latter would win.

It should be stressed, though, that disaffection was by no means a one-way process, for some of Temujin's entourage, Altan, Quchar and Qasar, secretly sympathised with the coalition's social aims and were unhappy with the Borjigid khan's new bearings.[43] In general, however, dissatisfaction worked to Temujin's advantage rather than the contrary. Many of those formally committed by their clan and tribal leaders to fight Temujin were unhappy about the decision, which accounts for the sieve-like 'secrecy' of the war plans drawn up by the new coalition. At least three major leaks reached Temujin almost immediately, one from a spy he had planted at the conference, one from a Qorolas warrior disgruntled that his chieftain was deciding his future for him, and one from Temujin's old friend and father-in-law Dai Sechen.[44] The Ongirrad, despite their many ties with the Borjigid, had opted to oppose Temujin. Dai Sechen therefore had to make the difficult choice between clan loyalty and kinship; he chose kinship and at once defected to the Borjigid with his sons. Temujin later reproached Dai Sechen for taking a long time to join him, but the patriarch replied that he had had to wait for the right moment or else his entire family would have been slaughtered; as it was, Temujin's men had accidentally killed his daughter's husband after mistaking him for a Tayichiud. He also pointed out that it was only because of an unauthorised plundering raid on them earlier that year (by Temujin's brother Qasar) that the Ongirrad had joined Jamuga in the first place.[45]

Having learned of the coalition's plan to launch a surprise attack on him, Temujin urgently requested Toghril to come with all his power. Jamuga meanwhile was trying to reach Temujin before Toghril, which led him into a bad mistake: he did not wait until all the allies' levies had assembled but rushed off for glory with a force composed mainly of his own troops and the Tayichiud who had survived the defeat the year before. Temujin planned to intercept him halfway to the River Onon.[46] He drew up his men in carefully prepared positions and issued a strict order that there was to be no looting during the battle; after the victory was won there would be time enough for that. Needless to say, there was much grumbling at this, orchestrated by the almost predictably disloyal trio of Altan, Quchar and Daritai.

When Jamuga's forces came within sight of their enemy, Jamuga asked his sorcerers to conjure up a storm to assail Temujin. They obliged, using a rainstone or bezoar soaked in water – actually a hard-core concretion found in the intestine of ruminants.[47] But the magic went disastrously wrong. A storm – of snow – did arise but it blew into the faces of Jamuga and his men, causing the various detachments of his army to lose contact with each other. To add to Jamuga's discomfiture Toghril arrived on the battlefield with his reinforcements. With his foe in disarray Temujin was able to win an easy victory. Naiman, Oyirad, Merkit and Tayichiud streamed off the field in a panic, each detachment going its own way. The victors dispersed, Toghril to pursue Jamuga and his men, Temujin on the tail of the Tayichiud; for him revenge always trumped political expediency.[48]

There followed another rout of the Tayichiud, but only after a hard-fought running battle along the banks of the Onon, and mass slaughter, but the defeated came close to taking down the victorious general with them. Temujin was seriously wounded in the neck by a poisoned arrow. In Far Eastern warfare of this era arrows were usually poisoned, using vipers' venom, and they were deliberately notched, which meant they stayed longer in the wound, giving the poison a chance to spread.[49] Those wounded by arrows usually had the wound sucked clean and were then given milk to drink, but Temujin's wound was serious (his neck artery had been pierced) and he came close to death. Jelme proved the hero. Unable to stop the bleeding, he continuously sucked out the blood and spat it out while his master lay unconscious. As the blood was pumping out copiously, he was unable to spit it all out, and had to swallow much of it; in this way he estimated he ingested fully two pints of the khan's blood.

While all this was going on, the Tayichiud rallied and came close to defeating their demoralised oppressors, but in the end Mongol discipline won the day. When Temujin recovered consciousness around midnight, he asked for milk. There was none to hand, so the resourceful Jelme then performed a valiant and outrageous feat. Stripping to his trousers, he made his way to the nearby Tayichiud encampment, posing as a refugee from one of Jamuga's defeated bands. Having located a horn of milk, he then stole away with it and was able to bring it back to quench Temujin's thirst.[50]

That was the battle of Koyiten. It had a number of immediate and important consequences. Jamuga, infuriated by the early defection of the Naiman and others, attacked them once they were all out of Temujin's range and confiscated all the loot they had managed to take. It was a rash action, taken in hot blood, and it seriously affected his credibility. The Naiman pointed out, reasonably enough, that they had been in the vanguard, had taken the brunt of the short-lived battle and might even have prevailed had Jamuga not arrived late with the main army.[51] The coalition, begun with such high hopes, began to dissolve, as more and more disillusioned groups and clans broke away.

But Jamuga was not the only leader incensed by the behaviour of his colleagues. Despite Temujin's earlier express veto on plundering during the battle, Altan and Quchar broke off and did exactly that. Temujin also retaliated with confiscation, thus angering Altan and Quchar and nudging them closer to an open break.[52] Such was the fluidity of attachments and alliances on the steppe that it sometimes resembled a game of musical chairs.

One certain consequence of the battle was that the Tayichiud were now finished for good as a political force. They were never recruited for the later Mongol empire, and their fortunes revived only when the empire itself declined in the fourteenth century.[53]

Then there was the effect of the events of Koyiten on Temujin himself, his personality and psychology. Jelme's prompt action had saved his life. Sucking at the wound to remove the clot meant a continuous flow of blood which not only lessened the chances of dying of poison but also prevented an embolism. Temujin's initial attempts to self-doctor were disastrous, as he had attempted, by contrast, to staunch the blood. Moreover in his devotion to his leader Jelme had swallowed a large quantity of blood; both this and the spitting out were contrary to normal Mongol taboos.[54] Yet Temujin's response to this heroism was ingratitude and paranoia. With his morbid fear of treachery, he somehow formed the idea that when Jelme stole away half-naked, he was thinking of deserting. Why, he asked, did Jelme have to disrobe? Jelme explained that it was a brilliant circumstantial touch, so that his self-proclaimed status as refugee would not be queried; why else would a man fetch up at the Tayichiud camp half-naked? Jelme defended himself stoutly, pointing out that he had now saved his master's life on three occasions, once on Mount Burqan when Temujin was in danger from the Merkit, once by sucking out the blood, and once by going to the Tayichiud camp to get milk for him to drink. Temujin grudgingly conceded the truth of all this.[55]

But the dark side of Temujin, so openly on display in his reaction to Jelme's heroism, contrasted with the khan's wiser, more statesmanlike behaviour in recruiting the man who had almost killed him. Among the haul of prisoners taken after the battle was a Besud clansman, identified by a number of witnesses as the one who had fired the near-fatal arrow at Temujin and clearly an archer of great skill. He was led before the khan expecting to be killed. Temujin asked if he had anything to say before he passed sentence. The clansman replied that he had nothing personal against the khan but he was a Besud, a sub-clan of the Tayichiud, and what the Tayichiud leader ordered he had to obey. This was the sort of loyalty that appealed to Temujin. The Besud warrior added that if his life was spared, he would become Temujin's greatest warrior. Something about the man struck a chord with Temujin, who announced that he was taking him into his inner circle and that henceforth he would be known as Jebe ('the arrow').[56] His judgement was sound. Appointed to command of a troop, Jebe soon proved his calibre and was promoted. Moving rapidly up the hierarchy, he was soon colonel of a division and went on to become one of the greatest Mongol generals.

Jamuga spent the year 1202 licking his wounds while he pondered his next step. His allies were now scattered all over Mongolia – the Naiman in the Uluq Taq area, the remnants of the Merkit along the River Selenga south of Lake Baikal, the Oyirad camped along the Sisgis River west of Lake Khovsgol. It was open season for the victors. Toghril spent the year hunting down the remaining Merkit – it was clear he had something of an obsession with this tribe – while Temujin prepared a self-avowed campaign of genocide against the Tartars.

At his war council he announced that he intended to kill all Tartar males taller than a wagon wheel.[57] This policy was supposed to be of the 'most secret' kind, but the foolish Belgutei, who was at the council, boasted about it to his friends, alleging that the idea was his, and word filtered back to the Tartars. Temujin's powerful army searched relentlessly for the Tartars and finally brought them to bay at Dalan Nemurges, near the Khalkha River in eastern Mongolia, probably on the western slopes of the Khingan Mountains. Once again Temujin decreed that there should be no looting during the battle, but there would be equitable distribution afterwards, and once again Altan and Quchar took the line that such a ruling did not apply to them. The battle was the usual slaughterous affair and ended in utter defeat for the Tartars.[58] Afterwards the Tartar males were lined up for execution, but suddenly there was a scrimmage followed by bloody resistance. It transpired that the Tartars, warned by Belgutei's loose talk, had prepared for a doomsday scenario, had concealed knives about their person, and were prepared to go down fighting. In carrying out the execution, the Borjigid took an unacceptable number of casualties.[59] An enraged Temujin could have executed Belgutei for divulging state secrets, but instead humiliated him by appointing him as judge in all cases involving commoners, in effect an arbiter of petty disputes. Temujin was always fond of Belgutei personally, but had no great opinion of his talents. Although he continued to be shown the usual courtesies customary for members of the khan's family, Temujin excluded him from his council of state and told him that he would never again be privy to important decisions.[60]

But Belgutei was not the only family member to cause trouble. Predictably Altan and Quchar had stopped fighting during the battle to pursue their own mania for loot. This time Temujin humiliated them publicly. Their booty was confiscated and distributed among the poorest members of his army. Furiously angry, Altan and Quchar stole away to join Jamuga and denounced Temujin as a tyrant.[61] The khan consoled himself by adding the Tartar princesses Yesui and Yesugen to his roster of wives.[62]

The winter of 1202–03 saw Temujin and Toghril facing yet another Naiman coalition. Buiruk put together a powerful army, stretching all his resources and recruiting the many diverse anti-Temujin elements in Mongolia: Toqto'a Beki and the surviving Merkit, the handful of Tartars left of military age and, potentially most important of all, Jamuga and his allies, who now included Altan, Quchar and Temujin's uncle and brother Daritai and Qasar. Altan, Quchar and Daritai were angry about Temujin's confiscation of their loot and considered themselves his superiors, as being more senior Borjigid. Qasar's was a more serious case. Systematically treacherous and disloyal to his elder brother, he pursued a zigzag pattern throughout his short life, always stopping just short of some action that would give Temujin no choice but to execute him. There had already been three major acts of disobedience which in a lesser Mongol oligarch could have been construed as treason. He had tried to hatch a conspiracy with Belgutei when Temujin slapped down his half-brother over the Tartar incident; he had disobeyed the khan's orders, refusing to kill one thousand Tartar prisoners because his wife was a Tartar; and it was he who had gratuitously attacked the Ongirrad and temporarily driven them into Jamuga's camp.[63]

Since Buiruk's estranged younger brother Tayang was also Jamuga's ally, the elder Naiman chief's golden dream was that his nation might finally be united and the past forgotten. This campaign was a major effort and ranged widely over Mongolia, from the Altai to the Khingan Mountains.[64] But at every point the Naiman and their allies seemed outthought and outwitted by Temujin who, in this campaign, began showing distinct signs that he was evolving from a journeyman steppe warrior into something more original. Where the Naiman acted conventionally and did everything by the book, Temujin proved versatile and protean, at one moment standing his ground to fight a pitched battle, the next switching to guerrilla warfare. The Naiman forces were ponderous and lumbering, but the Mongols seemed to have mastered the art of dispersing and reforming as if by magic. Temujin's strong personality and increasing confidence in his own abilities inspired his men, who were happy to follow puzzling or unusual orders. He seemed to produce an innovation a week, a feat of which his foe was quite incapable.

At some stage in late 1202 or early 1203 in the Black Forest on the banks of the River Tula, Toghril formally adopted Temujin as his son and, it was implied, his heir and successor to the Kereit kingdom; he told his adopted son that the heir presumptive, Ilkha was 'quite useless'.[65] The ceremony involved formal oath taking and entitled Temujin to call Toghril father; both parties agreed that, after all, this was the logical conclusion of the original *anda* relationship between Toghril and Temujin's father Yesugei.[66] The relationship got off to a happy start; some time that winter the Naiman were badly defeated at a place called Chegcher, possibly the mountain near Mount Chiqurgu. The engagement was fought in a heavy snowstorm, there were severe casualties on both sides, but the Naiman had the worse of the encounter, for many of their troops were said to have frozen to death when retreating, suffered severe frostbite and together with their animals, toppled over cliff edges to their death in the wind and darkness.[67] It was typical of Jamuga, nominally a Naiman ally, that he should have entered the fray at the eleventh hour, but only to harass and loot the stricken Naiman.

The year 1203 thus started promisingly but it was one of ill omen and bad fortune for Temujin. Testing the reality of his new bond with Toghril he asked for the hand of his daughter Chaur-beki for his son Jochi, but was curtly refused. Back at the Kereit court Ilkha had reacted with fury to the news that there was a new heir apparent. When Temujin's marriage proposal came in, coupled with the idea that the Senggum should take a Mongol bride, Ilkha protested bitterly to his father that this was a further insult. He pointed out the inequality of the proposed arrangement: if Temujin's daughter married one of the Ong Khan's sons, she would expect to sit at the back of the tent and be treated like a lady, but if Chaur-beki married Jochi, she would have

to sit near the door of the tent like a servant.[68] Ilkha proposed that his father break decisively with Temujin and join a new coalition Jamuga was putting together. Toghril refused indignantly: it was one thing to turn down a marriage proposal – this might give offence but was not a declaration of war; but how could he forsake his *anda* to whom he had sworn a mighty oath to treat him as his son? Besides, Toghril never cared for Jamuga personally and told his son so in unequivocal words: 'Jamuga is a flatterer, of no consequence and untrustworthy.'[69] Ilkha, who was in secret correspondence with Jamuga, left it at that for the moment but stole away to confer with his fellow-conspirator.

Temujin's marriage proposal has divided commentators. Some think it was politically foolish, that Temujin was 'pushing his luck' and revealing his ambitions as overlord of Mongolia too openly, so that Toghril began to draw back and grow circumspect. Others, more convincingly, claim that Temujin was testing the waters, to see what value the entente with his 'father' really had. He suspected, and he was right, that both Toghril and his son were secretly snobs, who did not think him high-born enough for intermarriage with the illustrious ruling family of the Kereit, that Toghril would never actually accept him as his successor, and that in his opposition to Ilkha he was protesting too much, secretly pleased with the turn of events. He could now claim that he wanted to give Temujin all that he desired, but that his son and the Kereit people would not let him.[70]

By fuelling her husband's scepticism, Borte was the mastermind behind this episode, carefully advising her lord and rehearsing her points cogently and lucidly. Toghril, she argued, was systematically untrustworthy; what credence or dependence could you place on a man who had deserted an ally at the height of a battle (as Toghril had done with Temujin), and, having been restored by Temujin's good offices, offered him not a scintilla of the booty when he campaigned against the Merkit in 1198 – a campaign he could not have undertaken if Temujin had not restored him![71]

Meanwhile Jamuga, Ilkha, Qasar, Altan and Quchar met to discuss how to compass their ends. Jamuga advised that the best thing was to insinuate that they had clear proof that Temujin was in secret talks with the Naiman and that the Kereit people were on the brink of rebellion, and to present Toghril with an ultimatum – either Ilkha or

Temujin – so as to wear him down by a combination of *fait accompli* and cajolery. Jamuga knew his mark well: Toghril was old, tired and essentially weak and in the end would take the line of least resistance.[72]

The anti-Temujin conspirators rode to Toghril's encampment to confront him. Toghril's camp was in the Black Forest, only about two hours' ride away from Temujin's on the Sa'ari steppe; since the Ong Khan was now supposed to be Temujin's father and they were still allies, such proximity was not at all suspicious. Jamuga spoke eloquently about Temujin's fickleness and volatility, contrasting it with his own steadfastness. This may have been the occasion when he famously said 'I am the crested lark that stays put; Temujin is the skylark that breaks off and goes home,' contrasting his own steadfast reliability to the flightiness of the migratory skylark.[73]

Toghril was probably more impressed by the presence at the meeting of a deputation from a new confederation from the western steppes of Central Asia, with representatives present from Qara Khitai, the Uighurs and even (some say) the new power in Transoxiana, shah Muhammud II.[74] All of these were concerned about the rise of Temujin and badly needed the Kereit to win, for commercial reasons. Already the period of permanent warfare on the steppes, now some thirty years old, had escalated from petty tribal disputes to a grand conflict with two main deep structures. On the one hand was the social war, with Temujin and his host of have-nots ranged against the traditional aristocracies; it was Temujin's contempt for the old oligarchy that was the deep reason for the discontent of Altan, Quchar and Qasar. On the other was a concealed trade war for the control of commerce in Siberia and the Far East. The Uighurs and Nestorians of the West wanted Toghril to prevail so that the trade privileges in Mongolia would be theirs. Temujin, though, was favouring the rival Islamic merchants and, only recently, had received envoys from them asking for trade concessions in Siberia; one of them, Asan by name, bought up a huge quantity of squirrel and sable pelts from the Mongols.[75]

Gradually Toghril was worn down, and in the end ties of blood and kinship prevailed over his oaths to Temujin. But Toghril was aware that in battle there are no certainties, that even the most puny of Davids can defeat the mightiest Goliath in the press and confusion of battle. He insisted that subterfuge be used initially. An invitation was issued: Toghril announced that he had had second thoughts about the Mongol proposal of marriage and now wanted to proceed; to celebrate the union he therefore invited Temujin to a great banquet he was preparing. The conspirators intended to assassinate Temujin as soon as he arrived at the camp.[76]

Temujin set off blithely unsuspecting, planning to make a leisurely journey to the banquet. First he visited 'father' Monglik, who had acquired the title by his recent marriage to Hoelun. Monglik warned him that there was an assassination plot afoot, and mentioned poison as the conspirators' preferred method. Temujin decided not to press on to the feast but sent two envoys in his place named Buqatai and Kiratai.[77] Shortly afterwards full details of the plot were revealed to Temujin by two herdsmen or horse wranglers, Kishiliq and Badai. As soon as Temujin was dead, Ilkha intended to swoop down on the Borjigid in a surprise attack that would surely annihilate them, demoralised as they would be by the death of their leader. This intelligence from two of the 'wretched of the earth' shows clearly that Temujin's 'coalition of the dispossessed' was paying important dividends. Temujin never forgot slights and favours; three years later he was able to reward Kishiliq and Badai when he promoted them from the ranks to generals of division.[78]

Temujin now had to prepare for an imminent assault from Toghril's coalition army, which was likely to outnumber his three to one. He sent out urgent appeals to his confederate clans to assemble with all speed. Some promised to bring their power but, alarmingly, others claimed that this was the Borjigid's khan's private war, that his actions had not been ratified at a full council, and therefore that they reserved the right to absent themselves from the muster. The plain truth is that many of them did not like the odds: they had joined Temujin on the promise of a cornucopia of spoils and booty but were now being asked to fight to the death; the plain subtext of their response was 'we didn't sign up for this.' Bitterly Temujin blamed the pernicious example of his brother and almost spat out to his confidants: 'I have had enough of my brother. Who can bear to see his retinue?'[79]

Alarmed by the perfidy of these recreant clans, Temujin led his forces on a dash to the Chinese border, hoping to acquire fresh allies and weapons and, maybe, help from the Jin. The enemy, in hot pursuit, caught up with him at Qalqaljid Sands, on the Manchurian frontier, near the River Khalkha. The battle that followed was one of the bloodiest yet on the steppes and the most desperately fought.[80] Toghril commanded the forces of the anti-Temujin coalition, having offered the position to Jamuga and been refused. Jamuga's behaviour at this juncture was nothing short of bizarre. In command of the vanguard, he could easily have overhauled Temujin on the way to Manchuria, but proceeded at a snail's pace on the pretext that he needed the Ong Khan's main army to join him. After turning down the supreme command, Jamuga proceeded to demoralise his allies by warning what tough opponents the Mongols were, and capped it all by sending a secret courier to Temujin with intelligence concerning the disposition of the Kereit forces.[81] When Toghril was almost at striking distance, Temujin struck camp, pulled his forces away and left camp fires burning to make the enemy think they had located him. A wild Kereit charge through the empty camp brought them up short, but at last Toghril did locate the real forces and gave battle. Temujin delayed committing his forces in hopes that reinforcements would arrive, and finally did see one of his banners in the enemy rear. Unaware that only a small number of clans had rallied to his cry, he badly overestimated the size of his forces behind the enemy, and found himself sucked into a general engagement where the Kereit held all the cards.[82]

It was fortunate for Temujin that two of the clans assaulting the Kereit from the rear were first-class units led by doughty warriors. Quyildar of the Mangqud clan performed prodigies of valour, vowed to place his horse-tail standard on a hill on the far side of the enemy and, amazingly, made good on his boast. He then charged the Kereit centre and managed to break up their formation just as they were preparing for a charge. Another chieftain in the Kereit rear, Jurchedei of the Uru'ud clan, gradually forced the enemy to give ground and capped his exploits by wounding Ilkha in the face with an arrow.[83] The heroic fighting by these two prevented Temujin and his men from being overwhelmed, and Temujin later testified that only the fortuitous wounding of Ilkha saved his forces from annihilation. Finally, heavily outnumbered, Temujin withdrew under cover of night and loitered nearby, hoping for Mongol survivors to join him. His immediate circle urged him to flee with all speed but he explained that he could not abandon the force in Toghril's rear. He sent messages to them to break off fighting and circle round for a rendezvous.[84]

That was the battle of Qalqaljid Sands. Although the Kereit did not score a knock-out blow, Temujin had been heavily defeated on points, but his propaganda machine managed to persuade posterity that he had won a pyrrhic victory; both Rashid-al-Din and the *Secret History* fell for this blatant lie.[85]

Once again Temujin, on the ropes, was given time to recover, courtesy of Jamuga. At first Toghril was minded to pursue the Mongols through the night, but Jamuga advised him that he would be better tending to his wounded son; the Mongols were weak, in disarray, had no refuge to fly to and could easily be mopped up later. The foolish Toghril not only accepted this advice but passed it off to his inner circle as his own original thought. After all, he reasoned, with Jamuga, Altan, Quchar and Qasar on his side and Temujin beaten, the future was his. 'If they do not come back we can go after them, collect them like horse droppings, and bring them back,' he boasted.[86]

Temujin needed the breathing space for, not only had his army taken a severe mauling, but Bo'orchu, Boroqul and, most importantly, his 17-year-old son Ogodei were all missing. Temujin spent an anxious night, sitting on his horse throughout the hours of darkness, with men stood to at the ready, awaiting the next assault from the Kereit. His army's discipline was superb: here was a defeated army, perhaps on the point of receiving the *coup de grâce*, but there was no panic. At daybreak Bo'orchu limped in. In the battle his horse had collapsed under him after being stricken with an arrow. On foot, he had been on the point of being captured when the fortuitous wounding of Ilkha led the Kereit to veer away to form a protective wall around their prince; after that he managed to steal a horse and found his way back to the Mongol force by a circuitous route.[87] Shortly afterwards, Boroqul came in accompanying a wounded Ogodei, strapped across a horse and unconscious. In an uncanny rerun of the incident at Koyiten he had sucked the blood from a wound in Ogodei's neck, and blood was still dripping from his mouth when he reported to Temujin, who burst into tears at sight of his bloody son. The Mongol medical staff cauterised the wound (the first time this process is described in the histories) and Temujin publicly thanked Heaven for his son's deliverance, but then boasted that even if the enemy had caught up with him, he could still have beaten them off.[88]

It was a moment of foolish vainglory, for having started the battle with some 4,600 men against Toghril's estimated 13,000, he was left with just 2,600; the casualties had been horrific. With these tattered remnants he retreated, initially to Dalan Nemurges, scene of his great victory against the Tartars the year before, then along the Khalkha River towards Lake Buir in Ongirrad territory.[89] Here, amazingly, given that the man who was asking for help led a vanquished host, the Ongirrad agreed to ally themselves with him and swell his ranks. This was an early sign that the shrewdest brains among the nomads had already concluded that in the long run Temujin would prevail in the epic struggle for mastery of the steppes.[90]

There followed a period of sustained roving in the early summer of 1203. Temujin's itinerary seems to have taken him initially south to skulk in the forests of the Khinghan, then back north to the River Khalkha, where he held a great hunt or battue and thoroughly revictualled his army. One sadness was the death of Quyildar from the wounds he had sustained at Qalqaljid Sands and news that another commander, Borokhula of the Tumed (another hero of Qalqaljid) had been ambushed and killed by enemy scouts. Then Temujin proceeded north again to Lake Hulun, where he made summer camp. From there he sent out a series of long letters of reproach to his principal enemies. Altan and Quchar he berated for their treachery in very harsh terms, his message to Ilkha was of the 'more in sorrow than anger' type, while Jamuga was accused of envy and jealousy unbecoming in an *anda*. Temujin told Altan and Quchar that they were getting one last chance – there was really no excuse for them as they had not put themselves forward as candidates for khan of the Borjigid despite still wanting the leadership, almost as if they expected to be elevated by public acclamation. However – and this part of the message was coded – if they were prepared to stay with Toghril for a year as secret agents, when he settled accounts he would spare their lives.[91]

By far the longest screed went to Toghril, and it contained bitter recriminations against the old man's treachery – inexcusable not just because he broke the most sacred oaths sworn on the steppes but because of the many favours Temujin had done him and the many chestnuts he had pulled out of the fire, the restorations, the rescue from penury, and so on. If Toghril had a grudge even so, he continued, he should have settled it man to man and not involved Temujin's family in the dispute: 'If a two-shafted cart has a broken shaft, the ox cannot pull it. Am I not your second such shaft? If a two-wheeled cart has a broken wheel, it can travel no farther. Am I not your second such wheel?'[92] Toghril seemed genuinely moved by Temujin's letter and proposed putting out an olive branch to the Borjigid, but his son Ilkha rejected the idea venomously and responded to his own letter with open contempt, saying that the only possible answer was *guerre à outrance*.[93]

Temujin cleverly made these missives read as if he were a desperate man, whose only remaining resource was repining and recrimination; in actual fact he was building up his strength, ready to strike back when least expected. Gradually he assembled a new coalition – Ongirrad, Ikires, Nirun, and – ominously for Toghril – the renegade Kereit clan of the Nunjin, including Chinqai, who would later be one of his most trusted advisors. As a skilled politician, he knew how to appeal to people's interests: to the Muslim merchants he promised a golden age of trade when he finally prevailed; to his men he held out the prospect of untold riches after victory; to the ousted Khitans, formerly the ruling dynasty of northern China, he promised restoration once he was ruler of Mongolia.[94]

Meanwhile he moved to his final camp of the summer, at Lake Baljuna, somewhere in south-eastern Mongolia near the border with Jin China.[95] Here, in swampland, he was safe from attack, but conditions were dire; the lake was almost dry and water had to be squeezed out of handfuls of mud.[96] But here too took place one of the most famous incidents in Temujin's life: the swearing of the Baljuna Covenant, when nineteen of his senior commanders took an oath that they would fight to the end at his side against the Kereit, come what might. To seal this mighty accord the Mongols slaughtered a horse, boiled it and ate it. The wording of the oath is variously reported, but one version reads: 'May any of our covenant who divulges this plan collapse like this riverbank and be felled like this forest.' Temujin himself then took a counter-oath while holding a handful of dried mud: 'If I finish the great work I shall share with you men the sweet and the bitter; if I break my word, then let me be as this water.'[97] This was the Mongols' equivalent of Henry V's speech before Agincourt, and those who pledged themselves were equally destined to become 'we few, we happy few'. Usually, Mongols would desert or drift away from a defeated leader, and this was the reason the later Genghis Khan so highly prized the veterans of Baljuna ever afterwards.

The band of brothers stayed a long time at Baljuna while Temujin digested the implications of the news that reached him from the Kereit country. As so often on the steppes, the victors had soon fallen out among themselves. The quincunx of Jamuga, Altan, Quchar, Qasar and Daritai conspired together to oust Toghril, finding him now surplus to requirements and needing a stronger leader for the final hunt to destruction of the Borjigid khan. Toghril, though, proved too nimble for them, and the conspirators were forced to flee. Altan, Quchar and Jamuga went to the Naiman; Daritai and Qasar, however, decided that their fortunes were best served by submission to Temujin.[98] Daritai asked to be readmitted to the fold and sent his nephew valuable intelligence, including the news that many Kereit had joined the rebels in their failed coup against Toghril, were on the run and thus capable of absorption into the Mongol host, and also that Toghril was not maintaining a standing army but relying on seasonal levies. Qasar demonstrated his newfound commitment to his brother by raising an army – mainly Kereit who had backed the losing side – but Toghril defeated this host and took Qasar's wife prisoner. Qasar narrowly escaped with some of his children and a handful of retainers and is said to have existed for a time almost entirely on bird's eggs.[99] He then had to make his way perilously to join Temujin at Lake Baljuna. He claimed to have sustained attacks by the Kereit and to have fought running fights all the way there, though there is no real evidence of this. Doubtless he was trying to exaggerate the hardships he had endured by switching back to his brother but, when he arrived at Baljuna, Temujin did not reproach him for his past treachery.[100]

Instead Temujin used Qasar as a pawn in an elaborate game of deception and disinformation. First he sent a message to Toghril, purporting to come from Qasar, saying that desperation, destitution and continued ill-usage by his brother meant he had no choice but to beg the Ong Khan for amnesty. Moreover, he added, Temujin's army had now dispersed in despair and the Borjigid khan was a fugitive. Since this intelligence was confirmed by his own spies, Toghril took the bait and arranged an envoy who would preside at a blood-brotherhood ceremony, at which Qasar was to swear to be Toghril's ally in perpetuity. The luckless representative sent out by Toghril was named Iturgen. Intercepted on the road by Temujin's men, he was brought back to Baljuna, where Temujin ordered Qasar to prove his loyalty by executing him. Qasar had no choice: it was kill or be killed.[101] Temujin was thus sealing off any possibility that Qasar could change his mind and return to Toghril, for killing an ambassador was not only perceived on the steppes as a war crime but went against Temujin's own deeply held principles. But to a Machiavellian the end always justified the means even if, in pagan terms, Temujin had to put his own soul in jeopardy.

Temujin had originally scheduled his final settling of accounts with Toghril for 1204, but now a great opportunity had presented itself. Thinking the danger from Temujin was past and Qasar was firmly in his net, the Ong Khan grew complacent. Besides, food shortages at Lake Baljuna meant that Temujin's army might diminish alarmingly over the gruelling months. Everything dictated a lightning campaign in the early autumn – an exact reversal of the strategy his enemies had used against him that very spring. The decision to use trickery shows that Temujin was still not strong enough to confront the Kereit in a pitched battle. Forced marches took the Mongols west from Lake Baljuna to the Kerulen, where they learned that Toghril was now based at his favourite camp on the River Tula in the Black Forest and a great banquet was being prepared, which meant that the Kereit soldiers would be drunk.[102] It seems, however, that the blitzkrieg was not a total surprise; at the last moment Toghril must have received warning, for the decisive battle was fought at Jer Gorge, usually located between the sources of the Tula and the Kerulen.[103]

Though caught off guard, the Kereit fought back ferociously. The battle raged for three days, and casualties were terrific. Finally, on the third day, Temujin's new star general, Muqali, stormed Toghril's armed camp and took it. Ilkha fought particularly well, but by nightfall of the third day he and Toghril were fugitives, their army utterly routed.[104] Though he got away under cover of darkness, Toghril was shortly afterwards murdered by a band of Naiman peasants or brigands near the Nekun River; allegedly they failed to recognise him. His head was cut off and taken to the Naiman ruler Tayang who had it plated in silver and kept above his throne as a mark of respect to a gallant ally.[105] Ilkha fled initially to north-eastern Tibet, where he was nearly murdered, then on to areas under the control of the Khitan and the city of Kashgar before ending in the territory of the Uighurs, in the region of Kucha, where he lived for a short time as a bandit before being killed by a local emir.[106]

Perhaps surpisingly, given his genocidal record with the Tartars and Merkit, Temujin did not order a general massacre of the Kereit aristocracy. He knew many of them personally, and both sides accepted that the conflict had been unnecessary, a product of Ilkha's pride and ambition and Toghril's weakness. This was a very different matter from Tartars and Merkit, whom Temujin loathed for reasons both personal and to do with tribal revenge. He incorporated all the most talented Kereit military officers into his army. An admirer of the general Qadag Baghatur, he spared his life on condition that he devote himself to the widow and children of the recently dead hero Quyildar.[107] Always well informed, Temujin knew which of Toghril's advisers had merely been doing their duty and which of them shared Ilkha's hatred and detestation of the Mongols. On this basis he pardoned Qadag, one of Toghril's inner circle, but executed Kokochu, officially the Ong-Khan's equerry but really more of a boon companion.[108] Temujin ascended the Kereit throne in a formal ceremony, announced that henceforth Kereit and Mongol would be one nation, and set in train an extensive system of compulsory intermarriage.

Why did Temujin defeat Toghril when on paper the Kereit ruler had greater numbers, greater resources and better political contacts? There can be many answers to this. Toghril was both weak and cruel, a treacherous fratricide who was indecisive and unable to think things through half a dozen moves ahead like a chessplayer – the ability Temujin possessed with a vast quantity to spare. Fitful, cowardly, vacillating, Toghril allowed himself to be made a fool of by Jamuga. His weakness particularly manifested itself towards his son whom he should have slapped down decisively for reasons of state. Instead he allowed a father's weakness to decide the future of the Kereit. It is unlikely there was much merit in his claim that he gave in to his son to prevent rebellion and civil war in his kingdom.[109] Temujin was far more intelligent than the Ong Khan, was a better politician, had a more disciplined army and a more efficient system of intelligence and espionage. One of the Kereit grandees he spared was Toghril's brother Jaqa Gambu, who later turned out to have been one of his reliable spies at the Kereit court.[110] Moreover, Toghril suffered heavily from desertions and defections both before the decisive battle and during the three-day encounter at Jer Gorge.[111]

Another important factor in Mongol superiority was the sheer brilliance of their commanders. No fewer than three of them – the 27-year old Subedei, the similarly-aged Jebe and the 34-year old Muqali – were authentic military geniuses, and this is to say nothing of the highly talented Jelme, Bo'orchu and Boroqul. Even the so-called 'lesser lights' would have been an adornment to a lesser army. One of Temujin's nine paladins was Chila'un who was unhorsed in battle with the Kereit yet seized a lance and routed a mounted opponent. Temujin expressed his stupefaction: 'How can a man who has fallen from his horse have the strength to get up and do battle? Even if he does get up, how can he charge a rider and defeat him? Have you ever seen a man on foot do battle to bring the heads of the unruly under his claw? I have never seen the likes of this champion.'[112] By contrast, the Kereit commanders, with the exception of Qadag Baghatur and Ilkha himself, emerge from the sources as boastful but effete, at once risk avoiders and irresponsible. It is difficult to improve on Rashid al-Din's sombre conclusion: 'This was the end of the rulers of the Kereit nation and the extinction of their tribe. God knows best.'[113]

The only obstacle now to Temujin's hegemony in Mongolia was the Naiman, but it was a formidable one. In great alarm after the unexpected defeat of Toghril and the overthrow of the Kereit state, Tayang assembled in the winter of 1203–04 the fourth and mightiest Naiman coalition, harnessing both the power of his own nation and the disparate and heterogeneous (though numerous) war bands of those tribes and clans who had suffered under the Mongols. To his standard flocked Jamuga, Altan, Quchar, Alin-Taishi, self-styled leader of the 'true' Kereit (those who refused to accept the rule of Temujin), Toqto'a Beki and the few remnants of the Merkit, Quduqa Beki of the Oyirad, and many others.[114] The sources are very clear that the war in 1204 was started by Tayang, but he had no choice, since coexistence with the new state that Temujin was founding was impossible.

Tayang's grand strategy rested on the idea of catching the Mongols between two fires, with the Ongud, a powerful tribe numbering more than 4,000 nomadic families, assaulting them from the south and the Naiman from the west. He hoped for solidarity from the Ongud because of their ethnicity (both Naiman and Ongud were Turkic tribes) and their religion (both were Nestorian Christians). But this idea very soon foundered; it was in fact always going to be a non-starter, as Tayang would have realised had he been less politically naïve. Alaqush Digid Quri, the Ongud chief, was already firmly in the Mongol camp, and his son had married an aristocratic Borjigid bride.[115] In terms of realpolitik the Ongud thought that Temujin's hegemony in Mongolia would stabilise the Chinese frontier, where they were uncomfortably ensconced, being involuntarily caught up in wars whenever nomads raided south into China or when the Jin in retaliation sent out punitive expeditions.

The Jin, meanwhile, anxious not to see a powerful empire solidified on their northern borders but afraid that the Naiman would win the coming encounter (until far too late they always underrated the Mongols) sent word of Tayang's intentions; it is said that their messenger arrived at the Mongol camp shortly after Alaqush's own envoy, bearing the identical message.[116]

But the failure of his two-pronged strategy was not Tayang's only problem; his own family provided even worse nightmares. To begin with, his brother Buiruk refused to collaborate or make common cause with him, thus halving the Naimans' military strength. Even worse, Tayang was completely under the thumb of his wife Gurbesu, an avid devotee of the war party, who was able to browbeat her husband into deferring to her wishes. Although still a young woman, Gurbesu had gained a psychological ascendancy over Tayang because she had been previously married to his elderly father; after his death Tayang inherited her. This is why the sources seem confusing about Gurbesu, at one time referring to her as Tayang's mother, at others as his wife. Gurbesu expressed open contempt for the Mongols and said their only use, 'once we have washed their dirty hands, will be as milkers of cows and sheep.'[117]

Temujin's preparations for war were more impressive. Even before joining battle with Tayang he had begun the radical reorganisation of the Mongol army that he would perfect after 1206, arranging his units in tens, hundreds and thousands, using the decimal system so beloved of the Manchurian Jurchens who ruled northern China but which actually went back as far as the Hsiung-nu nomads of the first centuries of the Christian era.[118] In addition to these decimalised contingents, there would be a personal bodyguard, eighty handpicked men for night duty, seventy to act as day guards; the *pièce de résistance* was the formation of an elite battle force like the Persian 'Immortals' of old or the Roman praetorian guard. Next he started on an inchoate imperial administration, trying to work out a system for pacifying all the peoples he had conquered recently. Opting for the magic number nine, he divided each non-Mongol territory into nine units, and built a hierarchy of local government based on faithful retainers with 'regulators' or governors at the apex, whose job was at all cost to keep the people pacified and avoid rebellion in the rear while Temujin advanced on the Naiman.

He sent out heralds to announce that, whereas all Mongolia was henceforth under his suzerainty, all tribes and clans would have de facto autonomy provided they made formal submission. Many of the tribes – Ongud, Ongirrad, Oyirad, and so on – were happy to do this; but not all. To the latter Temujin issued the warning for which he would bcome world-famous: surrender or die. He promised the recalcitrant that they could expect nothing except relentless, ruthless war, with no mercy when they finally surrendered.[119]

In strategic terms Temujin enjoyed several advantages. His conquest of the Kereit gave him access to the logistically crucial River Orkhon, providing a gateway to the Ordos Desert and western China, which in turn opened up key invasion routes through the Altai Mountains.[120] His leading generals war-gamed the various scenarios, taking into account that the Naiman were far superior numerically, and that the Mongols would have to march west to engage them and might therefore arrive tired, while the commissariat planned the numbers of animals to take with them on the trek and the location of the waterholes. Temujin, always a master of deceit, encouraged leaks from his army purporting to show that morale was low and that if the Naiman struck first, they would have a walkover victory.[121] One of his most famous bits of disinformation involved turning a horse loose close to the Naiman camp as if it had escaped from the Mongol army. The nag in question, a spavined, emaciated and sorry-looking specimen, duly limped into the midst of the Naiman, producing guffaws of overconfident laughter at the thought that this was an average example of a Mongol warhorse.[122]

Temujin's original intention was to attack the Naiman in the high summer of 1204, but he was determined that he should never be seen as a despot. He therefore declared that both the details and timing of all campaigns would henceforth by decided at a quriltai or grand council, attended by his senior generals and most trusted advisers. At the council, majority opinion at first backed the khan, on the grounds that before July the horses would be too thin for gruelling warfare. But then a troika consisting of Belgutei, Temuge and Temujin's uncle Daritai (newly restored to favour) argued strongly for the element of surprise. Belgutei was particularly eloquent, arguing that a pre-emptive strike would work, as the Naiman, bogged down with huge herds and flocks, were ill-equipped to deal with a mass raid.[123] Finally Temujin was convinced and, sending Jebe and Qubilai on ahead with the vanguard, he got under way on 17 May 1204.

Sadly, our sources, so detailed on some of the minutiae of the campaign, are a hopeless jumble right up to the final battle four months later.[124] It is clear that the Mongol army marched slowly west via the Rivers Kerulen and Tula and covered the 700 miles to the Naiman realm by the end of June. First contact with the Naiman appears to have come to the west of the River Kodasin. Battle was joined with a far superior Naiman force led by Tayang, with Jamuga and others in attendance as allies; some say the site of this first battle was in the Khangai near present-day Karakorum. This was probably the famous occasion when Tayang saw Temujin's 'four hounds' in action – Subedei, Jelme, Jebe and Qubilai – and asked Jamuga who they were; he, with perfect knowledge of all the notables, was able to identify them individually.[125] Marvelling at their prowess, Tayang might have got the first inkling of the immense task ahead of him, and his spirits cannot have been raised by Jamuga's panegyric on the brilliance of Mongol military talent. Someone with real political nous – which Tayang was not – might have been alarmed at the extent to which Temujin was already building up a pan-Mongolian confederation, for none of the 'four hounds' was a Borjigid; Qubilai was apparently from the Barulas, Jebe a Tayichiud and Jelme and Subedei hailed from the Uriangqai people. However, on this occasion Tayang enjoyed the bliss of ignorance for, finding himself hopelessly outnumbered and knowing how tired his men were after the long march west, Temujin withdrew at dusk.[126] He then issued a solemn order, to be disobeyed on penalty of death, that each man in his army should light five fires and set up dummies beside them which would be illuminated by the flames, so that the Naiman, seeing such a nocturnal inferno, would conclude that the Mongols had received massive reinforcements and would not pursue them.[127]

Perhaps doubting his ability to prevail against such opponents in a pitched battle in open country, Tayang announced a Fabian strategy: he would lure the Mongols into the Naiman heartland in the Altai Mountains, where the invader would be at a grievous disadvantage. This decision caused immediate uproar among his captains, who protested that it smacked of cowardice and would seriously affect morale in the army. Harsh words were uttered, with many opining that Tayang was no better than a woman; one of the generals is said to have remarked that the command should be turned over to Gurbesu immediately, as she showed far more steel than her husband.[128] Opposition to Tayang's strategy, which was undoubtedly the right one, was almost universal, with the 'antis' headed by Tayang's son Quqluq, who made much of the fact that they had Jamuga on their side. The Naiman ruler therefore had no choice but to accede reluctantly to the majority.

There followed, during the high summer of 1204, a game of hide-and-seek, with Temujin apparently trying to wear down the enemy before closing in for the kill. The sources are vague on the details of this cat-and-mouse period, but Mount Xanxar in the eastern Khangai, the Sa'ari steppe between the Tula River and the Dolon Uul and the region between the Dolon Uul and the Orkhon River are all mentioned: essentially the area between the Khangai to the south and Lake Khovsgol to the north.[129] Eventually, either Temujin brought the enemy to bay or Tayang decided to stand and fight. After crossing the Orkhon, Tayang drew up his forces at Chakirmaut at the foot of the eastern slopes of Mount Naqu, a small mountain between the Orkhon and the Burgut Mountains.[130]

The Mongols approached, primed for this moment: Qasar commanded the main force in the centre, the crack troops were on the wings, Temuge had the reserve and Temujin himself led the vanguard, ably supported by the 'four hounds', Subedei, Qubilai, Jebe and Jelme. Just before battle was joined, the issue was all but decided by the sudden defection of Jamuga and his host from the Naiman, at a stroke depriving Tayang of his numerical superiority.[131] Of all the puzzling actions of this superfox over the years, this was the most enigmatic. Even more mysterious is the message said to have been sent by Jamuga to Temujin at this point, assuring him that Tayang was a paper tiger. This was the culmination of Jamuga's odd behaviour during the campaign; it is said that every time he spoke to Tayang about the martial prowess of the Mongols he depressed him further.[132] Others claim that the message itself was apocryphal, that Jamuga decided from the moment Tayang's Fabian strategy was rejected that the Naiman would lose and simply timed his exit to cause maximum damage to them. Yet another view is that the cultural divide between Jamuga's Mongols and the Naiman was a crevasse, that he feared that to order them into battle against Temujin would cause rebellion and desertion. At all events, no sooner had the first arrows been fired than Jamuga's men were streaming off the battlefield.[133]

What followed was the Borjigid khan's supreme achievement on a battlefield, and certainly the most crucial encounter he ever fought. With their backs to the wall, the Naiman fought superbly, winning astonished praise from Temujin, who had not expected them to be such doughty warriors. But the defection of Jamuga was a body blow, and the Naiman now faced the greatest warriors in Asia. Qasar, so often a disappointment to his brother, finally won his spurs with an outstanding performance directing the Mongol centre, yet the single most brilliant feat was the 'premature' attack by Temujin and the four hounds with the vanguard which surprised the Naiman before they were properly drawn up.[134] Pressure from the van and the wings gradually forced the Naiman back to the foothills; Tayang, fearing envelopment, formed a square and withdrew his men from the flanks of the mountain, which actually increased the danger of encirclement. It soon became clear that, whatever their valour, the Naiman were no match for the Mongols in either discipline or generalship. Tayang was forced to break up his square and begin withdrawing up the mountain to avoid being trapped. As dusk came on, the Naiman, taking terrible casualties, were forced farther and farther up Mount Naqu towards the summit. Struggling with horses and carts on the cliffs and narrow passes of Mout Naqu, Tayang's army lost hundreds more men as they plunged over cliffs and into ravines in the darkness; as the *Secret History* puts it, 'they died, packed close together like felled trees.'[135] Tayang himself, who had been mortally wounded during the battle and was losing blood rapidly, was in no state to rally his men, but his chieftains, once at the summit, decided they would go down fighting. In an amazing exploit that drew stupefied admiration from Temujin, they staged one final banzai charge down the hill before being surrounded and cut to pieces. The Mongols offered them terms as an honoured enemy if they would surrender, but the Naiman refused.[136]

By morning Temujin had won as complete a victory as it was possible to imagine. The Naiman army had been annihilated, Tayang died of his wounds after a few hours in captivity, and the great Turkic-Nestorian state was no more.[137] The campaign was officially wound up on 24 October 1204. Tayang's son Quqluq managed to escape with a handful of followers and fled, initially to the Irtysh River. At the news of the Naiman's disaster, all the tribal minorities, the Tayichiud and the rump of anti-Mongol Ongirrad, who had formed rebel or guerrilla bands against Temujin, concluded that the game was up and surrendered. Only the Merkit continued defiant.[138] As with the Kereit there was no general massacre, for Temujin's intention was to enrol all males of military age in his ever-victorious army.

Two consequences of his great victory gave Temujin particular personal pleasure. Gurbesu was brought in and, as punishment for her previous arrogance and insults, was taken as one of Temujin's concubines but assigned a very low position in his harem. Temujin taunted her cruelly when he first bedded her: 'Did you not say that the Mongols had a bad smell? Then why have you come to me?'[139] If this showed his savage side, his adoption of all useful aspects of Naiman culture showed his intelligence and penetration. Among those in the Naiman civil administration who were captured was one Tatatonga, keeper of Tayang's Great Seal. When the importance of writing was explained to him, Temujin was impressed and appointed him as the keeper of a new Mongol Seal, with the consequence that Uighur writing became the official script of the new Mongol empire. Grasping the importance of literacy, Temujin also made Tatatonga his sons' tutor, with special emphasis on teaching them to read and write in the new script.[140]

Next it was time to settle accounts with all who had aided the Naiman against their own kind. Altan and Quchar finally got their long-deserved comeuppance and were executed, as was Daritai, despite his final act of re-ratting at Lake Baljuna. However, the greatest prize was always going to be Jamuga. He was said to have been reduced to a following of just sixty men soon after the battle, since the majority of his followers, realising they would not be slaughtered but absorbed in Temujin's 'New Model Army', came in to surrender as soon as they realised the Naiman had been utterly defeated. Temujin sent out search parties all over Mongolia to find his childhood friend; he realised that Jamuga was the only serious threat still left to his total dominance. After a year on the run Jamuga was reduced to just five companions and was eking out a living as a bandit in the Tannu Mountains. Hearing there was a bounty on their leader's head, his companions suddenly surrounded him, trussed him up, slung him across a horse and took him to Temujin.

Jamuga, who knew very well how his *anda*'s mind worked, warned them they would not benefit from their betrayal, but they ignored him.[141] He was, however, allowed to write to the Mongol leader and sent one of those quasi-oracular messages that always seem to characterise the exchanges between him and Temujin: 'It has come to pass that black crows capture the mandarin duck.'[142] Jamuga proved a good prophet. His betrayers were executed immediately by Temujin, who always stuck rigidly to the principle that followers who betrayed their clan or tribal leaders merited death.[143] But now the question arose: what to do about Jamuga?

That this decision took a long time suggests that there was something very odd indeed about the lifelong on-off relationship between these two great Mongol chiefs. There are many things in the sources that make no sense. From the very first time Jamuga and Temujin faced each other across a battlefield – at Dalan Baljut in 1187 – Jamuga's attitude seems ambivalent. He broke off the battle and did not pursue Temujin, and the same thing happened on many subsequent occasions. He plundered the people who had chosen him as khan after Koyiten; he conferred with Toghril before their joint attack on Temujin and then broke off pursuit of the Borjigid; he refused to take command against Temujin when offered the leadership by Toghril; he abandoned the Naiman just as the battle of Mount Naqu began. What was Jamuga doing – at one moment with Toghril, the next sending messages to Temujin, then joining up with the Naiman? Why did he always plunge his putative allies into gloom by his estimate of the Mongols' prowess?[144]

Some of Toghril's advisers put it to him that Jamuga was mentally unbalanced. Did his pattern of abandonment of allies denote a neurotic compulsion to repeat history? Much depends on our analysis of Jamuga's psychology and personality. The sources show a man in a state of permanent motion and agitation, almost as though he had boundless energy but no clear aim in life. It is implied that he was less successful as a steppe leader than Temujin because he maintained traditional divisions between the different tribes in his army and did not try to create a new holistic ethos and ideology; there was no recruitment of shepherds for top positions in his host. Although a man of ability, Jamuga is shown as lacking vision, basically a Machiavellian intriguer, short-termist, treacherous and volatile, someone who had no code of honour and would cheerfully sacrifice a friend to attain his own ends.[145]

The problem is that this is a portrait painted by the *Secret History*, a tendentious, propagandist work dedicated to extolling the glories of the Mongol state created by Temujin. Moreover, it is a picture in terms of which other events shown in the *Secret History* become meaningless and even preposterous. The phrase 'letting the cat out of the bag' is often used by commentators who believe that, in putting together a farrago of the factual and the mythical, the compilers of the official record of the birth of the Mongol empire sometimes accidentally tell the truth at the wrong moments and thus alert us to the real state of affairs. The problem is compounded by the Delphic, almost Rosicrucian esoteric symbolism in which some of the key events involving Jamuga are recorded.[146] But some tentative – and perhaps even more than tentative – conclusions are possible by means of some historical sleuthing. To use Sherlock Holmes's famous formula, 'When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.'[147]

After eliminating the implausible thesis of mental illness, we are left with only two possibilities. Either Jamuga was an arch-Machiavellian, scheming always to make sure that none of his rivals on the steppes became too powerful, biding his time against the day when he would emerge as *tertius gaudens*, with all his competitors weakened, and scoop the pool. Or some other explanation is called for. However, the *tertius gaudens* hypothesis does not really explain his withdrawal at Mount Naqu, since his action then made it virtually certain that Temujin would win. Is it possible then that at some stage, most likely around 1196–98, Temujin and Jamuga made a secret pact to divide the empire they hoped to gain by cunning and trickery? This would be in line with the and would explain much that otherwise seems enigmatic, turbid or even meaningless.

The main objection to this hypothesis would be that it does not explain why, in that case, Jamuga fled to the Tannu Mountains. Why would he not have appeared at Temujin's side to collect his reward? It is of course possible that Temujin told him that he needed time to organise his new empire before he publicly 'forgave' his old 'enemy'. Certainly in the long conversation reported in the *Secret History*, Temujin as good as admits that Jamuga was a double agent.[148] It is time to look at this more closely.

According to the *Secret History*, Temujin offered to share his empire with his boyhood friend, but Jamuga refused and opted for death, saying that just as there could never be two suns in the sky, so there could not be two khans. Temujin's speech contains an encomium for all the services Jamuga did him, and it includes the many desertion episodes; why cannot we be two shafts on a cart, he asks. It is surely obvious that here the annalists have simply swapped the names of the speakers: Jamuga, aware that Temujin is thinking seriously of killing him, rehearses the many services he has done Temujin and how much the khan owes him. Temujin by contrast says that there cannot be two rulers at the top, that this would cause civil war.[149] The *Secret History* absurdly has Jamuga saying that once dead, his spirit can preside over the new Mongol nation and protect it: 'I will watch over you, your grandsons and their grandsons, into the distant future. I will be your eternal spiritual protector.' But a foolish secretary has also included what Jamuga almost certainly *did* say when Temujin pronounced his sentence of death: 'In the black night I will haunt your dreams.'[150]

If this hypothesis is correct, and Temujin was guilty of a massive double-cross of a faithful agent, we have to ask what the motive might be. In a modern context, killing your own agent, Gestapo-style, is meant to convince the opposition that he really was an enemy. No such consideration can apply in Jamuga's case, so we are left with the gruesome likelihood that Temujin executed his own agent to protect his own credibility. He claimed to be a universal ruler with a mandate from Heaven. What would posterity say if, instead of a peerless warrior who defeated the Kereit and Naiman by sheer military genius, it turned out that he had prevailed only by treachery and betrayal? But let us grant Temujin the optimum case, that Jamuga really was an enemy who had done his best to defeat him in a ten-year struggle for mastery on the steppes. How does that justify his subsequent conduct?

Even if we accept the propagandist nonsense spewed out by the *Secret History*, that Jamuga asked to be killed, this was always predicated on his being killed bloodlessly by crushing, as befitted his rank and status.[151] Yet Temujin not only devised the most hideously cruel death he could think of but in so doing offended against all the tenets of Mongol custom and morality. Careful not to have the blood of an *anda* on his own hands, he sought out a man whom he knew to hate Jamuga with a passionate hatred, his own nephew Eljigidei, son of his younger brother Qaci'un. Eljigidei, a shadowy figure, was one of those sinister personalities so often encountered in history who inveigle their way to the centres of power without having any discernible talent. We know that he was one of Temujin's favourites but that he considered himself above the law. On one occasion he had been arrested for trying to brush past Temujin's bodyguard without official leave or password.[152] Once his fate was in Eljigidei's hands, Jamuga must have guessed the worst. His last recorded words were supposed to have been to the effect that Temujin was a mediocrity, that he had beaten the Kereit only because of the valour of the Uru'ud and Mangqud troops and the Naiman only because of the brilliance of the 'four hounds'; the only complimentary thing he could say about Temujin was that he employed a good maker of armour. He was then led out and hacked to pieces by Eljigidei and his minions.[153]

This was cruel and unusual punishment, contrasting with the normal method of execution meted out to Altan, Quchar and Daritai. Jamuga's death was as much a hideous blot on the escutcheon of Genghis Khan as Napoleon's assassination of the duc d'Enghien would be six hundred years later.[154] Whether Jamuga's actions can be set down to his cunning as a double agent, miscalculation or simple stupidity, Temujin's debt to him was colossal. Without him there would have been no Genghis Khan and, as one Russian scholar has commented: 'the nine-tailed banner [the equivalent of the Mongol flag] would have been dragged in the grass along with the Khan's severed head.'[155]